

Beholden To No Man

by phoenix

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

A/N: I hope that you enjoy this sequel to [Wounded](#). I enjoyed the characters I created so much, and received such wonderful feedback, that I couldn't let their stories end. This one is not under the same constraints as the original, so romance is an option.

For those interested in the Hogwarts staff, I have created a web page with my notes on each staff member. I thought readers might find the background information useful. [Post War Staff](#)

I also have one last shameless plug. Voting for the [Multifaceted Awards](#) is now open until 10 March, and *Wounded* and *Redemption* have been nominated. Take a look at the categories and vote for your favorite stories.

Chapter 1

The start of another term. For so many years it had become routine. This one was far from routine. Many familiar faces were gone, and much of the castle was still being rebuilt. He missed the routine. His life had been focused on routine. Now, it had all changed. And he wasn't sure if it was for the better.

He stood in a small receiving room off the Great Hall waiting for the unsorted second and third years. It had been decided to sort the twenty of them before the first years. Helen MacLean was among them. Aurelia was nearly positive her younger daughter would be sorted to Hufflepuff, but he wasn't so sure.

He glared at the Sorting Hat, sitting on the stool. He loathed the Hat. As soon as the headmaster's study was complete, he would be glad to have the Hat out of his possession.

There was a knock on the door, and Charlie Weasley stuck his head into the room. "They're all lined up. I'll go wait for the first years."

Severus nodded and waited for the first child. Hopefully this would not take long. As he recorded the houses for the new students, he let his mind wander to the Arrival Feast. He hoped that Adrian would not be as long winded as Albus had been. Of course, this year's speech was bound to be long as there were several new staff members to introduce and a plethora of other announcements regarding classes, dormitories and off-limit areas.

He was only half paying attention when Helen came in to be sorted. She smiled and said, "Good evening, Professor."

"Miss MacLean," he replied politely. This was as good a time as any for her to learn that their relationship at school would be different from the one they had had this summer. He nearly dropped his quill when the Hat pronounced she belonged in Slytherin. He had thought that she possessed the intellect to join her sister in Ravenclaw, but he had not expected the girl to be sorted to Slytherin.

"I'm glad I'm in your house, Professor," she said happily.

"Move along, Miss MacLean. There are others to sort before the first years arrive."

"Yes, Professor," she replied sadly.

He tried not to feel guilty about how he treated her. She had been warned that he could not be her friend anymore.

Once he finished the straggler sorting, he picked up the Hat and the stool and made his way to the Great Hall. When he walked through the main door to the Great Hall, a momentary silence fell across the room. As he made his way to the front of the room, he could hear the whispers start. He had expected this.

Staring at the front table, the absences were noticeable. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Hooch, and Slughorn, all victims of the war. Hagrid was also gone; the gamekeeper had not felt like staying on at Hogwarts after it was over and had moved into a remote area of Wales with his half-brother. In their places were Adrian Westmoreland, Kalliope Morris, Brendan White, Davis Connolly and Charlie Weasley.

He set the stool and Hat at the front of the room and spun on the students. When the whispers did not stop, he said sternly, "Silence." After a few seconds, he continued, "Tonight we welcome the new class to Hogwarts. As is our tradition, they will be sorted into one of the four houses: Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff or Gryffindor. When your name is called, sit on the stool and put on the Hat. Anderson, Martha," he called out the name of the first student to be sorted. He had no intention of giving that foolish Hat a chance to sing its ludicrous song.

It took half an hour to sort the students. He recognized most of the names of those sorted to his house. He was quite surprised by the names he did not recognize. He had the impression that the Hat had sorted Muggle-borns into Slytherin; this was something that required some research as it should have been impossible for that Hat to do that.

Before they sat to the feast, they were forced to endure the Sorting Hat's song. He had warned the infernal thing that it would not sing this year, but it had ignored him. Had he not been in the Great Hall, he would have hexed it to a million pieces. Once the Hat was done, he placed it in the back corner of the Hall and took his seat next to Adrian.

The headmaster rose. "Welcome, students. I am Headmaster Westmoreland. As you are no doubt aware, there have been many changes at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Most of you know the deputy headmaster, Professor Snape." Adrian paused as there was a murmur from most of the students and polite applause from the Slytherins. "Heading Ravenclaw is Professor Sinistra and Professor Lupin is the new head of Gryffindor as well as our Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor."

Severus tuned out the rest of Adrian's speech as it devolved into introductions of the new staff members and short biographies on each. He tried to determine how the students felt about him. A part of him expected a series of owls in the morning that would call for his immediate resignation.

As he looked around the room, his gaze paused on Irma Pince. The dour librarian had been at Hogwarts as long as he had, yet he had never really spent much time with her. In the past, he had considered forging a friendship with her, Albus had even encouraged it, but he knew it had been impossible under the circumstances.

Now that he was beholden to no man, perhaps it was possible. They had both been alone for a long time. He pushed that thought from his mind. Too much time had passed. Albus had been wrong. Severus had never planned on things turning out as they had, but everyone was content with the current arrangement. Why change it? After all, he had Aurelia's friendship. There was no need for him to forge a relationship with anyone else.

The first week of classes had been difficult. He had hoped that the first years would not have been corrupted, but they had. The students seemed to forget that he had excellent hearing. Everywhere he went, he heard whispers of "he murdered Dumbledore." He was growing quite tired of these whispers. Surprisingly, the owls demanding his resignation had not come.

His Friday afternoon class was the Ravenclaw-Gryffindor fifth year class. As he dismissed the class, he said, "Miss MacLean, you will remain behind."

Her fellow students gave her a sympathetic look before filing out of the room. She moved to the front of the room, not sure if she was in trouble or not. "Yes, Professor?"

"I need you to speak with your sister. She does not seem to fully grasp the change in our relationship."

"Yes, sir. I'll talk with her." She waited to see if he had anything further to say. When he didn't, she turned to leave, but paused halfway up the stairs. "Professor?"

"Yes, Miss MacLean?" he replied without looking up from the papers he was grading.

"The whispers. They aren't all bad."

"Which whispers?"

"Not all the students think you are guilty of murder."

"I care little for what the students think." In fact, he did to a point. It was one thing for the students to fear and respect him. It was quite another for them to believe he was a murderer. While at Aurelia's, he had read the articles that recounted the trial in which his name was cleared. He had even received an Order of Merlin, First Class. He supposed that award had a lot to do with his reacceptance into society. Of course, he had not received it in a public ceremony. Shortly before the start of term, a Ministry Official had come by the school and handed it to him. The official explanation had been that it was announced when the others received theirs, and there was no point in having a ceremony this far after the fact.

His attention was brought back to the present by the sound of the door closing. He planned to spend the hour before dinner grading assignments. If he were going to spend weekends working with Aurelia on the Lethifold paper, he would need to use his time efficiently. And after this week of classes, he needed the time away and a friend with whom he could discuss the week. Adrian would not fulfill that role. The last thing he needed the headmaster knowing was that he cared what the students thought about him.

Severus paced across his room. Every time he turned, his eyes paused on the box on the table. He tried to tell himself that he had nothing to be nervous about. He had spent the last four Saturdays at Aurelia's house working on the Lethifold paper. He should not be nervous about going to see her. When the clock on the mantle chimed, he knew that he would have to leave soon. Once again, his eyes paused on the box.

It was nothing, just a simple thank you present. He had noticed that her pestle was cracked. After checking with Julia that Aurelia had no sentimental attachment to the old one, he had purchased her a new one. It wasn't as though this was a personal gift, such as jewelry. This was a thoughtful thank you gift from a friend, right? Then why was he so nervous?

He was about to close the door when he decided he would take the gift. Shrinking the box so that it fit in his pocket, he headed out of the dungeons. The last thing he needed was anyone asking questions.

Unfortunately, his departure was not destined to go unnoticed. Adrian was heading towards the door at the same time he was. He scowled, hoping the headmaster would leave him alone, but he knew that was highly unlikely.

"Ah, Severus. Beautiful day for a walk, isn't it?" he asked cheerfully.

Severus grunted in reply, hoping it would discourage further conversation. They had developed a decent working relationship, but Severus still found the man entirely too cheerful.

"Heading to the Three Broomsticks or perhaps to pick up some supplies?"

"Neither," he replied bluntly.

"A lady friend, then?"

"What I do on my own time is none of your concern."

"Of course. I've been meaning to ask you what you think about Professor Morris. I was quite concerned about her arriving so close to the start of term."

"She seems to have earned the respect of the students. When I surveyed her class, she had adequate classroom skills."

"Is that the only opinion of her you have?"

"What *are* you getting at, Adrian?"

"Nothing, nothing. I just thought that you could use a friend here. I know that you and Remus have too much history, and you have never been particularly close to any of the others. I just thought you might enjoy the company of someone your age."

"If you are trying to 'set me up', you can desist now."

"Not interested in her, eh? Perhaps Brandon?"

Severus refused to even dignify that remark with an answer.

They walked in silence for several minutes before Adrian continued. "You will forgive my curiosity, won't you? I'm just trying to ensure that whatever you have been doing won't impact your work."

"And you are this interested in everyone's personal life?" Severus had always been a private man. Of course, he had never had a personal life before.

"To an extent, yes."

"I assure you, what I do in my spare time will not effect the performance of my job."

"Of course. I hadn't really expected it would. I just thought that you might be moving on with your life."

Severus was trying to figure out what Adrian was getting at. He knew that Adrian and Dumbledore had been acquaintances and that the two men had discussed him, but he had no idea about the extent of those discussions. He was beginning to get the impression Adrian was taking far too great an interest in his personal life. "Adrian, I truly have no interest in discussing my personal life with you, or anyone else. I am an adult and capable of making my own decisions." He was thankful they were almost at the gates and he could finally get away from the questioning.

"Of course. Say hello to Healer MacLean for me," he said casually as he walked on to the village.

Severus paused for a few seconds before Disapparating. It seemed that Adrian was as all knowing as Albus had been.

As he approached Aurelia's house from down the street, he was pleased that she was keeping the more complex wards he had taught her. Some of them were variations of the protective spells on Hogwarts. When he knocked on the door, it was answered almost immediately. "Good morning, Aurelia."

She smiled at him. "Good morning, Severus. Please, come in."

As he always did, he asked, "Have you noticed anyone following you?"

"No. It seems that I've been forgotten. I'm not going to complain. I assume everything is secure at school?"

"Yes. You know that I would notify you immediately if it wasn't."

"Just as you know I would do that same for you. Did you get a chance to go through the draft I sent you?" she asked as they walked toward the library.

He pulled several rolls of parchment out of his robes. "I have. I have a few suggestions, and then I think it will be ready for publishing, if you agree."

She grabbed the first roll of parchment and unfurled it. "Let's have a look."

Aurelia spent more than an hour going through the scrolls. During that time, Severus worked to prepare lunch.

He was interrupted when Aurelia asked, "Is it that time already?"

"Nearly. What is your opinion?"

"I think it's ready for submission. I don't really have anything to add." She set the table while he was finishing lunch. "I wonder if we'll be laughed at for submitting this paper. I'm sure people will think we are insane for having undertaken that foolish quest."

"I think it will be met with disbelief. Have you made any further headway on determining any other uses for the essence?"

"Nothing I haven't already written you about. I'm loath to do too much testing on what I have. I would hate to waste any more. Are you sure you don't want to take any with you?"

"I do not have time to devote to research at the moment." He placed the food on the table and joined her. "Being Deputy entails more work than I had imagined. Between classes and the administrative details, I am quite busy. I look forward to coming here a few hours each week to relax."

"Well, I'm glad that I can provide you with some refuge from the chaos. I know there are many days I relish being able to come here and relax." She took a bite. "Very good job with the chicken. I'm still amazed that someone living at Hogwarts most of the year would know how to cook."

"As you say, I am only there part of the year. Summers, I have always been on my own. After having gotten used to the excellent food during the school year, I decided to hone my culinary skills." He paused a few seconds before continuing. "I'm glad you like it."

They didn't speak much the rest of the meal. Severus thought she appeared lost in thought, probably about the paper. He was considering the box in his pocket, trying to decide if he should give it to her. The resolve he had found before leaving Hogwarts was waning.

Before it could completely fade, he pulled the box from under the table and placed it between them before enlarging it.

"What's this?" she asked.

"A small token of my thanks. Please, open it."

Moving her plate to the side, she took the box and looked at it curiously before opening it. There was something heavy wrapped in tissue paper, and she removed it from the box. She was quite surprised to see a new mortar and pestle. "Thank you, Severus. I've been meaning to purchase a new one, but haven't gotten around to it yet. It's very thoughtful, but it wasn't necessary."

He got up and cleared his plate. "After all that you did for me, it was the least I could do."

She cleared her plate as well. "Still, thank you very much." She placed her arm on his and reached up to give him a quick peck on the cheek.

Severus froze and watched her take his gift down to the cellar. A woman had just kissed him, something that had rarely happened.

Severus sat in the staff lounge, enjoying the Strings Hour on the Wireless. This was all part of his routine, his way of relaxing at the end of the day. Part of his new routine. In the past, he might have played chess with Minerva. When their chess matches had started, he had not been very good, but over the years, his skill had come to match hers. He wasn't sure he wanted to play the game anymore. It reminded him too much of everything he had lost in the war.

Now, he generally graded papers, but tonight, he just wanted to unwind. He would grade the rest of the exams tomorrow. Staring at a book on arcane magic he had found in his last trip to Diagon Alley, he found he was not really reading it. His mind was lost on other thoughts.

He still had one promise to Albus left to fulfill, but he was no longer sure it was for the best. At the beginning of term, it had been easy to ignore that promise. Now, the more time that passed, the more often he considered carrying out that promise.

His reasons were not altruistic. Was it right to disrupt a life for his selfish desires? 'When it's over,' he had told Albus. Well, it was over, wasn't it? Shouldn't he right the wrong? *But she is happy not knowing me. What point would there be in telling her the truth?* For now, this was all the rationalization he needed. He was a grown man capable of making decisions for himself.

"Lovely music, wouldn't you say?" asked Brandon White as he took the chair next to Severus.

Severus grunted in reply, hoping to be left alone.

"I've noticed you in here quite a bit and was wondering if you had a favorite composition? I've always been partial to Masden's *Solstice Night*, though his *Equinox Eternal* is also a wonderful piece, if a bit more melancholy."

Severus was beginning to realize that the odds of having a quiet night were quickly decreasing. "Both works are passable," he replied. Adrian had admonished him to be more sociable after he had gone off on Kalliope Morris. When she began flirting with him, he had a strong suspicion that Adrian had encouraged her, and he did his best to discourage her.

"My sister sent me this wonderful bottle of brandy, and I was wondering if you might like to share some?"

Severus looked at White, trying to determine the man's motivation. The reminder to be polite rang in his head. And he had been contemplating refilling his glass. No doubt whatever brandy White's sister had sent was better than the bottle he had found on the credenza. "Thank you." He watched as White poured out two glasses and accepted the one he was handed. Checking the clarity, it had a beautiful amber color. He swirled it for a few seconds, warming the liquid, before taking a sip. "It is quite excellent."

"My sister has excellent taste. She's the sommelier at one of the more exclusive restaurants in London. I'm glad you appreciate it, though I thought you might."

Severus took a rather large gulp of his drink at the smile that White was giving him. He could almost swear the man was flirting with him. At that horrifying thought, he made a good dent in what remained in his glass. When he looked back at his companion, White had his eyes closed and was gently swaying his glass in time to the music.

"This is the way a day should end: lovely music, a nice drink, roaring fire and in the company of a friend."

Severus helped himself to more of the brandy. "Quite." He couldn't think of anything else to say that would not find him summoned to the headmaster's study.

White picked up the book Severus had been reading. "Ah, this is a fascinating tome. If you are interested, I have quite a private collection and could let you borrow some of them. Irma has been trying to talk me out of several of them."

Severus wondered if he should accept the offer. He was naturally intellectually curious, and the chance to see books that he may not have previously read was nearly irresistible. At the same time, he was wary of the way White was looking at him. He thought back to the glib comment Adrian made earlier in the term. He began to wonder if Adrian had made it his personal mission to make his life a living hell. A personal life should be just that. "Perhaps when I have more time," he replied in a non-committal tone.

"You know, if there's anything any of the rest of us can do to help out, I'm sure Adrian wouldn't mind if you delegated some of the tasks. History doesn't really change from year to year, and I dare say that grading essays takes far less time than analyzing potions." White flashed a flirtatious grin.

Severus wanted to lash out at White, but knew the real culprit was Adrian. "I'll keep that in mind if I need assistance." Hearing the announcer on the Wireless, he realized Strings Hour was over. "If you will excuse me, I have exams to grade."

Instead of heading for the dungeon, he headed straight for the headmaster's study. He didn't knock, but barged through the door. The room appeared to be deserted. "Where are you?" he growled.

From the upper level, he heard, "Ah, Severus, what an unexpected surprise."

Storming up the stairs, he found Adrian stargazing. "What was the meaning of that?" he demanded.

"You're going to have to be more specific, Severus. I'm not a mind reader, you know."

"You know damn well what I'm talk about. Last week, it was Morris you sent after me. This week, it was White. Oh, I'm sure you weren't overt about it, but I've seen the way you drop little hints to prod people along. You're as bad as Dumbledore. No. You're worse. He never meddled in my personal life."

"Really, you are overreacting. I did no such thing. Brandon is a friendly man. I'm sure you're just imagining things."

Severus fumed at the innocent look Adrian was giving him. "Stay out of my personal life and quit dropping hints to various members of the staff about how I feel about them." He stormed out of the study, feeling no less angry than when he arrived.

With the paper published, Severus found he had little reason to visit Aurelia, and he realized he missed spending time with her. They still corresponded, but he missed the long conversations. She was the first person he had met with whom he had been able to have stimulating discussions about potions. He heard his door open and looked up. "What do you want?" he growled.

"Ah, still irritable, I see," said Adrian.

Severus put down the parchment he had been sorting through. "As you can see, I am quite busy going through supply requisitions. I would like to finish this so that I can begin on grading essays."

Adrian took a seat, deciding not to wait for the invitation. "What are your plans for the Christmas Holidays?"

Severus did not look up from his work. It was still four weeks until the holidays and he had not considered his options. "I have not yet decided."

"As you can imagine, I'm trying to make sure we have enough staff members here to supervise the students. Full moon is over Christmas, so Remus won't be available. Grinelda and Charlie, quite obviously, want to spend time with their families. Pomona and Hespera will be staying. Kalliope has indicated she will probably be remaining. Additionally, the staff Christmas party will be the Thursday before everyone leaves for holiday. I'll expect you to be there. Oh, we'll be doing Secret Santa this year."

As much as Severus loathed social functions, he had always realized the importance of attending them. He replied dryly, "I can hardly wait. Is that all?" He was still quite irritated about the interruption, especially for something so trivial.

"For the most part, yes." Adrian rose from his chair. "You spend too much time in this office. You should get out more."

Severus chose to ignore the headmaster and was relieved when the man left without saying anything else. Now, he was going to be stuck selecting a gift for one of his co-workers. Deciding nothing good could come from dwelling on that, he went back to work.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Severus finished the requisition sheets. He had several questions about the second term requisitions for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Lupin seemed to not only believe that Hogwarts had an unlimited budget, but that he was not required to completely fill out the forms. There were several items on the list that Severus saw as extraneous. In order for him to fill those requisitions, he would have to cut back on Potions supplies, or find a way to collect ingredients himself, which was not an option given his lack of time.

Deciding to investigate the requisitions, he headed up to Lupin's office. When he found the office deserted, he clenched his jaw and checked the staff room. Lupin wasn't there either. It was still more than a week until full moon so Lupin should have been easy to find. A check of Lupin's quarters showed he wasn't there. Severus wondered where his Dark Arts professor could be.

Rather than waiting until morning, he decided to return to Lupin's office and see if there was more information on the requisitions there.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 2

After a few minutes of rifling through papers, Severus heard the doorknob. Once the door was open, he demanded, "Where have you been?"

Lupin was startled to find someone in his office, but he quickly regained his composure. "I wasn't aware I needed to check with you before leaving. And might I ask what you are doing in my office?"

Severus ignored the inquiry. "You should have informed someone that you left the castle. It would have saved me time. I have several questions about your requisitions for next term."

"And they couldn't wait until morning? I'm quite tired, Severus."

Severus narrowed his eyes and looked more closely at Lupin. He thought that Lupin did look quite tired, and now that he thought about it, he couldn't recall having seen the man at dinner the last several days. "What have you been doing? You have been away from the castle quite a bit lately."

"It's personal," Remus replied evasively.

"When it affects your ability to do your job, it is not personal. It is my business. Since you have not been here evenings, you are depriving your students of the opportunity to seek your guidance. As you have taught here before, I should not have to remind you that the students come before your personal life. Especially as a head of house."

"I know that. You don't have to remind me."

Severus crossed his arms. "Obviously, I do as you have decided that whatever personal errands you have been running are more important than your job. Had you informed me, it would have been a different matter. I would not have wasted my time searching for you."

"I told Adrian."

This rankled Severus. Why were they keeping secrets from him? "You told the headmaster?"

"That's what I said."

"Don't get short with me. If you are doing something that affects your ability to do your job, which it obviously does since you told Adrian, you should have also had the courtesy to tell me. Will you be experiencing any more *absences*?"

Remus was silent for several minutes before replying. "I will be here the rest of the week, though I will likely be gone most of the day Saturday. It won't be an issue if I miss the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw Quidditch match, will it?"

"No." He shoved several pieces of parchment at Lupin. "I have marked the expenditures you will need justification for. In addition, you failed to complete several forms. Our budget is not limitless, and the students *are* taking other classes." At this point, he was more irritated at Adrian for keeping secret why one of the staff was away from the castle than he was at Lupin. He could understand Lupin not trusting him, but not the headmaster.

Severus started toward the dungeons. He briefly considered confronting Adrian, but knew that it was unlikely the man would tell him anything more than Lupin had. When he arrived at his quarters, he found that he was not the least bit tired. Deciding that he needed someone to talk to about this, he wrote Aurelia a letter asking if she was free on Saturday. He would post it in the morning.

Friday morning, he received his reply. She would not be available until late afternoon. Severus had hoped to have a reason to miss the Quidditch match, but he would manage. In the meantime, he would continue looking unpleasant and discouraging conversation. Of course, this was something he had perfected over the years.

Weasley was sitting next to him at the Quidditch match, and looked quite uncomfortable. This gave Severus a small measure of satisfaction, though he tried not to show it. The one advantage of Weasley having been hired as the Care of Magical Creatures Professor was that the young man already had a healthy respect for him. It had taken some time to train the other new professors that he did not socialize. Brandon White had been the most difficult as he had a hard time accepting that anyone would prefer solitude to the company of others. For that reason, Severus had been forced to give up his evening ritual of listening to the Wireless in the staff room.

Perhaps he would return to the staff room in the near future. The others seem to have acclimated to his mannerisms.

After the Ravenclaw victory on Saturday, he found that he actually missed the sheer joy Flitwick had shown when his team had won. The small man would have been jumping up and down, cheering as loudly as his students. Hespera Sinistra was much more reserved and clapped politely. Severus had used his time to evaluate the teams, focusing on the Ravenclaws as the Slytherins would be playing them after the holidays.

The Slytherins and Gryffindors had tied in the opening match. He thought that was an auspicious start to the season and the term, but considering the small size of his House, he had been pleased with the outcome. Of course, the Slytherin-Gryffindor rivalry was different. It was more personal. While he had never enjoyed losing to the Gryffindors in the past, his professional respect for Minerva, and their professional rivalry, had made it more bearable. She had been one of the few other professors that remained objective and held students accountable. She was the only one that would take points from her House. Now, he would just be losing to the werewolf, something much less bearable.

Checking his watch, he saw that it was a little after two and decided to run some errands in Diagon Alley before going to Aurelia's.

Shortly before three, he arrived at Aurelia's street. As he approached her house, he saw someone leaving and instinctively sought cover. After a few seconds, he identified the visitor as Lupin.

He was fuming. Not only had Lupin not told him about this, but neither had Aurelia. After taking a few deep breaths, he stalked toward her door and rapped rather firmly. When she didn't answer after a few seconds, he knocked more insistently.

Aurelia looked flustered, and as though she had dressed quickly, when she opened the door. "Severus? What a surprise! I wasn't expecting you for about an hour."

He swept past her, as he did not want to make a scene on her doorstep. "I imagine. Still cleaning up from your little tryst?" he asked dryly. He should have known better than to get his hopes up about her. After all, why would anyone be interested in him?

"What?"

"I saw Remus leaving, and I know that he has been spending quite a bit of time here this week. You could have at least had the courtesy to let me know that you were interested in my colleague. Don't you think it's a bit unprofessional to invite me here shortly after he leaves?"

"You think? Oh, no, it's nothing like that," she insisted, horrified at what he was suggesting.

"No?" He crossed his arms.

She sighed. "Let's have a seat and discuss this over tea."

"I do not want tea, and I do not want a seat. What was Lupin doing here?" he demanded.

"Severus, please. There isn't a short answer. At least have a seat if you don't want tea." She headed into the sitting room and conjured her tea set.

Severus was forced to follow in order to hear her explanation. He sat, but he refused to partake of her tea. "I'm waiting."

"As you know, the two of us had a lot of time to talk while we were after the Lethifold. We have a lot in common. Both of us were very close to Aurors that were killed in the fighting."

"How charming. You've found comfort in each other's arms. Or is that beds?" he spat.

A fire lit in her eyes, she jumped to her feet and pointed at the door. "That's it. If you are going to be rude, you can just leave. I don't have to put up with this and definitely not in my house."

"I'm not leaving without an explanation," he insisted.

"I don't owe you anything. I will not have you insulting me and making baseless accusations. I am not one of your students, and I will not be treated that way."

He stared at her for several seconds. This was a side of her he had not seen before. Deciding he might have been hasty, he said, "My apologies for jumping to conclusions. I am willing to listen to your explanation."

She gauged him for several seconds before regaining her seat. "Very well. Though, one more outburst and I will insist that you leave. As I was saying, while we were after the Lethifold, we talked a lot. It has helped both of us to have someone with a shared experience to work through our grief. In addition, I became interested in how he lived with his lycanthropy. I started thinking about the Wolfsbane Potion again, but I didn't really have time to pursue it until we finished the Lethifold paper. After that, I started doing my own research. I've been meeting with Remus this week to discuss it and some of the improvements I have in mind. I hope to test a new variant of the Potion this full moon. As you can see, completely innocent."

"Why did you not let me know you were working on the Potion?"

"When we were working on the Lethifold paper, you told me how busy you were at school. I knew this project would be more intensive, and I thought it would be best not to pressure you to work with me. In addition, I know that you and Remus don't exactly get along well. I wasn't sure I could put up with the stress of dealing with the two of you again."

He knew that her rationale was sound, but he still felt hurt. He couldn't help but wonder if it was her polite way of shunning him. "I could have acted as a consultant. As you are no doubt aware, I have experience brewing the Potion and have made several subtle changes to it."

"I wasn't aware of that."

"As you can imagine, I have had precious little time to publish anything the last few years. Had you consulted with me, I could have saved you time. I have considerable experience experimenting with this potion."

She retorted, "And you don't think I do? I am the head of the Poisons Ward, after all."

"Yes, the Poisons Ward, not the Serious Bites Ward," he said sarcastically.

"And where do you think they get the Potion from? People in the Potions Department. I will have you know that one of my earliest assignments was working with Damocles Belby on this potion. I daresay I know more about it than you do and which research tracks are dead ends," she replied defensively.

He was quite surprised to hear this. He had never expected her to have that level of experience. "I didn't know." They continued to stare at each other. "If you don't mind, I would like to help you with your research. Perhaps I found something that Healer Belby didn't?"

She considered his offer for a few seconds. "All right. Just give me a few minutes to clean up."

"From what?" he asked suspiciously.

She sighed, exasperated by his suspicions. "We had a little lab accident. While I managed to clean up the mess down there, I didn't have time to get myself cleaned up. My lab journal is on the desk down there if you want to give it a look."

He was relieved to hear that it was just a lab accident, but he still didn't like the idea that she seemed to be going behind his back.

By suppertime, they had gone through her theories. She had proposed several lines of research that Severus had already explored and found to be dead ends. He offered to send her a copy of his research on the Potion.

"You don't mind joint publication again?" she asked.

"Acclaim within the Potions community has not been something I have strived for. I realize there is an expectation that you conduct research given your position, but I have no such expectations placed upon me." He had a thought about why she had not told him she was working on this project. "Is that why you didn't tell me? Because you want all the publicity?"

"Don't be absurd. Whether your name is on the paper or not doesn't matter to me. Besides, my name will come first," she said smugly. Checking the clock on the mantle, she continued, "Would like to pop out for a bite to eat? I'm afraid I haven't been to the market lately, and the pantry is quite bare."

"So long as it is not the Thai restaurant." That food had reacted quite badly with him last time, an experience he didn't want to repeat.

"I know of a nice pub in Glasgow you might like. Though, I will warn you that the clientele can be a tad rowdy on Saturday nights."

"Is there somewhere quieter?" He detested exuberant crowds. If it were not Saturday, he would have recommended the Three Broomsticks, but he knew that Adrian frequented that establishment on Saturdays.

She thought a few seconds. "Well, we could go down to Diagon Alley and see what we can find. Most of the places I know in this area require reservations on Friday and Saturday."

After a nice, quiet dinner they walked along Diagon Alley. When she looped her arm in his, he fought his instinctive urge to avoid human contact. After a few seconds, he had to admit that he liked the way it felt. Briefly, he considered wrapping his arm around her, but decided to wait. He really didn't have a reason to return to her house, but he didn't really want to leave her company. When he was with her, he felt different, and he didn't want to lose that feeling. He enjoyed her company, and that was not something he could say about many people. "If you would like to work on the Potion, I will have some time over the Christmas holidays if it wouldn't be an imposition

"I'll run it by the girls, but I don't see that there will be a problem with that. They haven't spokertoo badly about you," she joked.

"What does that mean?" he asked defensively.

"Well, Julia knew what you were like as a professor. I think Helen has been a bit surprised by your classroom demeanor. Julia did try to warn her, but she refused to believe how cold and... vindictive you can be."

"I am not vindictive," he stated.

She stopped walking, let go of his arm, and turn to smile at him. "Oh, no? I think anyone in Gryffindor would disagree with that. You forget that I have had a number of your former students work with me over the years. Don't worry, I know the real Severus Snape, not just Professor Snape. Well, it really is getting late, and I should get some rest. If you don't mind, I'd like to brew Remus' potion this full moon and evaluate the results."

He did mind, but he wouldn't tell her. "Of course not." He wasn't sure what he should do at this point and they shared an awkward silence.

Finally, she broke the silence. "Well, good night, Severus." She shifted on her feet a few seconds, then she leaned forward, placed her hand on his cheek, and stood on her tiptoes to press her lips against his. When he didn't return the kiss, she pulled away and Disapparated.

Severus stared at the empty space for several seconds. He felt his fingers on his lips where hers had been moments ago. He could hardly believe it; she had kissed him. Not a friendly kiss on the cheek as in the past, but a kiss on the lips. A woman had kissed Severus Snape, a man called: greasy git, surly bastard, and numerous other unpleasant epithets. This was a unique experience; most women did not see past his unattractive appearance, but she had.

And he had done nothing. There were several things he should have done. He should have wrapped his arms around her, returned the kiss. Once he had her breathless, they could have returned to her house and explored their feelings for one another. No, she was a lady, not one of his whores. He would treat her with more respect than that, but he definitely should have let her know he reciprocated her feelings, that he wanted their friendship to be more.

It was not as though he had never envisioned this happening. He had spent a good portion of this term imagining what it would be like to have a normal life, to have a girlfriend, to finally have her as his girlfriend. Something he had never dared dream about in the past. Now, he felt like it was almost within reach. Or had been within reach. He realized now that he hadn't acted for fear that she would reject him.

He should not have found her action completely unexpected. After all, she had been quite friendly to him, brushing against him, touching him, smiling at him. She had even agreed to let him spend the holidays at her home. Belatedly, he recognized that she had been flirting with him most of the evening. Why hadn't he done anything? What would she think now that he had refused to return her affection? Would he get another chance?

He berated himself for not returning her kiss. It had been unexpected and had not lasted long enough for him to return it. For a moment, he contemplated returning to the life he knew and hide in his dungeons and his work. It would definitely be easier than trying to decipher her feelings, but that life had not made him happy. He was suddenly struck with the realization of how little experience he had with friends in general and female friends in particular. Of course, because she was basically his only friend, he had no one to discuss the situation with. Adrian was the last person he wanted meddling in his personal affairs.

When he returned to Hogwarts, he decided to inform Adrian that he would not be at school over the holidays and hoped the man would leave it at that. As he walked to the castle, he realized whom he could ask for advice. He had a promise to fulfill, one that he had nearly forgotten about after all these years.

Aurelia knew it was too late to bother Michelle Parker. She would have to visit her friend in the morning. Sleep was a long time in coming as she tried to assimilate everything that had happened.

After Flooing Michelle, she joined her for breakfast. "Thanks for having me over."

"Think nothing of it. David isn't much of a morning person, especially on the weekends, so I normally take breakfast alone. Besides, it sounded important."

Aurelia pushed her food around her plate and finally took a sip of her coffee. "It is. At least, I think it is. I don't know." Even after spending most of the night thinking about the previous day's events, she wasn't sure what she wanted to say. "Severus found out that I'm working on the Wolfsbane Potion."

"And he's upset that you didn't ask for his help?" Michelle guessed.

"No. That I could have dealt with quite easily." She continued playing with her food. "He got upset that I was spending time with Remus."

Michelle smiled. "So he's jealous."

"That's what I think. What am I going to do?"

"Well, you like him, don't you? I mean, the two of you have spent a lot of time together."

"I like him as a friend. I don't know." She threw her fork down on the plate and looked up at Michelle. "It hasn't even been a year since Henry was killed. It just doesn't feel right to be thinking about someone that way. And add to that the fact he's Severus Snape, and I just don't know."

Michelle reached across the table to place her hand on Aurelia's. "What about him?"

"He's been through a lot, too. I just don't know." He was a reformed Death Eater, pardoned murderer, and had done a host of despicable things in his life. Was he really the type of person she wanted to be with?

"Well, it's not like you would be marrying him tomorrow."

"It's not just that. He's complex. How he reacted to the fact that I was working with Remus proves it. I don't even know that he feels that way about me."

"I would say that his jealous response is evidence that he does feel that way about you, and I can tell you feel that way about him," Michelle prodded.

"I don't know. I like spending time with him. And he's thoughtful in his own way. But when I kissed him last night, he didn't kiss me back." She still couldn't believe she had kissed him, and the fact he didn't respond had caused her to doubt that he did feel something for her.

"You kissed him?"

Aurelia noticed that Michelle had a sly little grin on her face. "I don't know what I was thinking. It was an awkward moment and... I don't know." Everything was so confusing. A part of her wanted to spend more time with Severus, but the other part felt guilty for replacing Henry. "Is it too soon?"

Michelle reached across the table. "You're the only one that can answer that."

"I just wonder what everyone will say. I love Henry and miss him. I'm just not sure it's right getting involved with someone else." After a few seconds she continued. "I think I'm reading too much into this."

"You could talk to him about this."

"How in Merlin's name do you bring something like that up?"

"Has he given you any signs that he likes you?"

Aurelia thought back on the time she had spent with Severus. It had been so long since she had looked for romantic signs in a man. Henry had not been shy with expressing his emotions and had gone out of his way to tell her how he felt. "Well, he did insist on dining at a quiet restaurant last night."

"Ah, there. He wanted to have a romantic dinner with you."

"Oh, yes, a romantic dinner discussing the finer points of the more grotesque potions ingredients," Aurelia replied sarcastically.

"Well, it is a shared interest. You have to start somewhere. Anything else?"

"Just the mortar and pestle that you already knew about."

"That's right. He gave you that fertility symbol of a pestle," Michelle said suggestively.

"Would you get your mind out of the gutter? It's a tool in potions making."

Michelle grinned slyly before continuing, "So, he's given you a gift and taken you out on a date. That's not bad."

"It wasn't a date. We were hungry, and I hadn't been to market."

"Are you in denial about this?"

"Maybe. I'm a little scared."

Michelle reached across the table and gripped Aurelia's hand. "Then just see where it goes. You don't have to make any decisions today."

It was nearly lunch before Aurelia finally left. She wasn't sure if talking with Michelle had helped, but it had felt good to talk through everything with someone. She had come to the decision that she would just wait and see how Severus behaved.

Sundays were generally quiet, for which Severus was incredibly grateful, especially since he had not slept well the previous night. In his dreams, he had relived the previous evening's kiss, but in his dreams, he returned that kiss and the evening ended quite differently. He pulled her tight, returned her kiss, delving deeply into her mouth with his tongue. She slipped her hands into his robes and he could feel her soft hands caressing his skin.

He was surprised when there was a knock on his office door, and it took him a moment to regain his composure. It was rare that a student would come by his office for assistance. He feared it was Adrian, but he knew that the headmaster rarely waited for acknowledgement. "Enter."

"Good afternoon, Professor," Helen said cheerfully.

"How may I be of assistance, Miss MacLean?" he asked. Once again, he would have to speak to Julia about her sister.

Helen fiddled with her fingers nervously as she crossed the room and sat in the chair. She kept her eyes on her fingers. "I don't think you know, but Mum's birthday is coming up on the twentieth."

Severus raised an eyebrow as he waited for her to continue.

"This is the first one since Dad died and..." Helen looked up at Severus, her eyes glistening from unshed tears. "I don't think anyone is going to remember."

"Surely she has friends and family that will help her celebrate." He had never really cared much for birthdays. It seemed pointless to celebrate the anniversary of one's birth.

Helen shook her head. "Dad's parents died a long time ago, and I've never met Mum's parents."

"Why tell me?"

She nervously replied, "I know you and Mum are friends. I thought that maybe you could take her to dinner, make sure she has a good day. We used to make her birthdays special and no one will be there his year."

"Thank you for your concern. I will take it under advisement."

"I won't tell Mum I told you." After flashing a quick grin, she bounded out of the room.

He watched her leave, unable to shake the distinct feeling that he was being manipulated. Perhaps she did belong in Slytherin after all. Now the question was what to do about her revelation? The twentieth fell in the middle of the week. It would look unusual if he invited her to dinner in the middle of the week.

After last night's kiss, he had been thinking about her, about how to spend more time with her, and Helen had given him precisely the information he needed to do just that. Her birthday might give him the opportunity to return that kiss and maybe even more. Perhaps he could take her out to dinner a few days late? And then there was the matter of a gift. This was an area in which he had no experience. He knew that it would be easy for him to ruin their friendship if he forced something that wasn't there.

He was sure that Adrian would happily give him relationship advice, but he refused to involve the headmaster. On numerous occasions, he had insisted the man butt out of his personal life.

There was another choice. One he had been contemplating since the beginning of term. Perhaps now was the time.

Severus was pacing nervously. He had never expected the day to come where he would fulfill his promise. He had no idea what the result would be. When he heard the knock at his door, he quickly crossed the room and answered it. "Thank you for coming, Irma."

"What is it that you couldn't discuss in the library?"

"Have a seat," he gestured at the chairs by the fire. Irma took one and he took the other. He picked up a book from the small table. "I have found a very interesting spell. I wanted to see if you knew where there might be any related spells." He opened the book, slowly pulled out his wand, and pointed it at her. Once she was looking at him, he used Legilimency to enter her mind.

While he had not set the memory block, he had been instructed on how to remove the charm. When he finished, he leaned forward to catch her and gently pushed her back into her chair. He knelt beside her and watched her as she looked around the room in confusion, as though trying to determine where she was. "How do you feel?" he asked quietly.

She squinted as she looked at him. "Severus?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"What happened to me? Where am I?"

"It will come to you soon enough." He knew that her old and new memories would take a few days to merge together. Dumbledore had told him that her original memories would manifest themselves first, and in time, the false memories would fade away.

She reached out to touch his cheek. "It's over? It worked?"

He covered her hand with his. "Yes, Mother. It worked. You are safe."

A/N: Only a couple of things. First of all, thanks again to Zen Lady who has been invaluable as a beta reader and to my good friend nota for acting as a sounding board. This is an addicting story to write.

Second, a small reminder that [Multifaceted Award](#) voting closes March 10 and the sequel, Wounded, and Redemption are both nominated.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore

gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 3

"It's all so confusing. I can remember being me, yet I can remember being her," said Eileen Snape.

"You will hold onto her memories for a very short time. Everything that happened since you became her, you will remember." He hugged her. "I'm sorry I had to do that, but it was the only way to keep you alive."

She returned the embrace. "I know." After a long silence, she asked, "Why did you do it? Why didn't you leave me that way?"

When he pulled away from her embrace, he regained his seat. Momentarily, he considered telling her that he almost had. He looked into her eyes. "I promised I wouldn't."

"What's to become of me now?"

He hadn't thought that far ahead. His reasons for restoring her memory had been partially selfish. "You may remain here and continue to be Irma Pince. Albus created her for you."

"What if that's not what I want?"

"What do you want?" he asked gently.

"I don't know. But I'm Eileen Snape, not Irma Pince."

"To everyone, you look like Irma Pince. Your appearance was altered so that no one would recognize you."

She reached for her face. "You altered my appearance?"

"Not me personally, but yes. There was no point in hiding you if someone would recognize you. I'm afraid that it can't be undone." He reached out and touched her in a tender fashion. "You can take some time off. Decide what you wish to do. If you wish to leave the school, I have a small savings that you can use to start a new life, though I would believe that Irma Pince would also have some savings."

"Yes, I do." She looked into her son's eyes and could tell that he was hiding something. "Something is bothering you, isn't it?" she asked gently.

"I always had a hard time keeping things from you. You were the only one that I have ever felt comfortable talking to." When he had been a boy, he had spent many long hours talking with his mother. That was something he had missed as he had become more enmeshed with the Death Eaters.

Her expression softened. "About what?" she asked gently.

"I have this friend. A woman."

A pleased smile crossed Eileen's face. "That's wonderful."

"There's more to it." He tried to decide which fact to start with. "She is the Healer that saved my life."

The smile faded. "Oh."

He knew exactly what she was thinking. It was the same thing that he had thought. That he was misreading the attention she had shown him as a caregiver. "It's not like that. I think she may feel something for me. We had dinner together last night and went for a walk after dinner. Before she left, she kissed me." He added quietly, as though hardly able to believe it happened, "On the lips."

"Ah, that's wonderful. Wait, I met her, didn't I? Aurelia MacLean?"

"Yes. She was with me this summer."

"Pretty young woman, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is." He paused before continuing. "It gets complicated. She was married to an Auror that was killed last year in the war."

"Hmmm. And you aren't sure that you are reading the signs correctly?"

"Precisely. It is possible that I have misread the signs."

"And you say she initiated the kiss?"

"Yes." It felt like he was being interrogated, and he wasn't used to divulging this much personal information.

"She could be giving you a signal that she is ready."

"That has occurred to me. Or she could just be making a friendly gesture. She has children, and she is very affectionate with them. What should I do?"

"A single woman doesn't kiss a single man on the lips to make a friendly gesture."

He stopped pacing and frowned at his mother, letting her know what he thought of that idea. "Her birthday is next week. I could gauge her emotions with a gift. But what sort of gift?"

"It depends on the message you wish to send her. Something useful would be the sort of gift a friend would give. If you want to be something more, give her something beautiful, though not entirely practical," Eileen offered.

Severus continued his restless pacing. "A trip to the village will be in order. Perhaps even Diagon Alley. I will think on this."

Severus entered the library as it was closing. He glared at the students straggling behind, encouraging them to leave.

Once they were gone, Eileen said, "What can I do for you, Severus?"

"Would jewelry be a suitable gift?" He only had a few days until Aurelia's birthday and had yet to determine what he was going to give her.

She paused in reshelving books. "Are you serious?"

"You said I should give her something beautiful."

"Well, yes, but I was thinking along the lines of a scarf. Jewelry is a rather personal gift."

"Then you should have been more specific." He found his inability to understand women quite frustrating.

She couldn't help the small chuckle. "My dear Severus, you really know nothing of courting a woman, do you?"

"You would mock me?"

She put down her books and moved to his side. "I don't mock you, dear. I only realize how I failed you as a mother."

"You didn't fail me. It is I who failed you."

She stopped him from saying anything further. "You didn't. You protected me, and you did the right thing. Now, back to your dilemma. If you give her jewelry, you will be sending her a very serious signal about your future together. Are you serious?"

"Well I wouldn't be contemplating this if I wasn't, would I?"

"I suppose not." She had briefly met Aurelia during the summer, but hadn't paid attention to how she interacted with Severus. "You could always wait until Christmas," she offered.

"No. Best to find out now. I can send her birthday present by owl. I am currently expected there over Christmas." He wasn't sure he could give her the gift in person.

"You're afraid of rejection."

"Of course I am. Look at me. I must be insane. Perhaps you are right."

"What about you?"

"Honestly, Mother. Do you really need to ask that? I did inherit my looks from you," he said snidely.

After a momentary pause, Eileen replied, "Well, she seems to have overcome that fact. What are you thinking about giving her?"

"That's what I came to see you about. I have your sapphire necklace. It isn't too fancy."

Eileen thought about this for a few seconds. "I think you might be right. What are you going to say on the card?"

"The card?"

"You weren't just going to send her the necklace and a note that says 'Happy Birthday, Severus,' were you?" She saw the look on his face. "You were. Oh, Severus, you have a lot to learn. You've honestly never courted a woman?"

"Would I be here if I had? Are you going to make fun of me or offer advice?"

"Tell her how you feel in the card. Perhaps you could quote a poem?" She watched him arch an eyebrow. "Or perhaps not. You need to write something that lets her know how you feel. Severus, I'm serious."

He sighed. "Why does it have to be so difficult?"

"Your other choice is to give it to her in person, but you've said you don't want to do that. I can help you write the card if you'd like."

"I'll do it on my own."

"Let me know how it turns out?" she called to his retreating back.

"I shall," he replied.

As full moon approached, Aurelia spent a great deal of time with Remus. He came by every evening to take his dose of Wolfsbane Potion. He only stayed long enough to eat dinner. She wanted to ask him if Severus had anything to do with the shortness of his visits, but thought better of it. She saw him grimace as he drank down the Potion. "The taste still isn't any better?"

"It's still bitter, but I don't think you can do anything about that. From what I understand, the Wolfsbane is quite bitter."

"Well, I'll see what I can do about that. Of course, that will be the level of refinement that gets worked on in the later stages."

"If it stops the transformations, I don't care what it tastes like. Do you really think you can stop them?"

"I hope so. Like I said before, we had to deal with some very interesting injuries during the war. Transformation injuries were quite common, and I'm hoping that some of what we came up with to treat those will help you out."

"I've cleared out the storage room for tomorrow."

"We could do this at the castle, my quarters there are quite secure," he offered.

She shook her head. "I'd rather do it here. I have a direct Floo connection to the wards at St. Mungo's. It's easier if something goes wrong. Sadly, we have a lot of experience dealing with lycanthropy. I feel better having access to that. And don't worry about the room; it's quite secure. The cellar is all stone, and I can vouch for the stoutness of the walls."

He didn't seem entirely comfortable with the arrangement. "I'll be here a little after three."

"Remus, don't worry. Like I said, I have lots of experience with werewolves. I know several restraining spells that will work in case the potion is not fully effective."

"All right. I should get going. I have some grading to do tonight."

She gave him a hug before letting him leave. "Make sure you get some rest tonight. I don't need you up all night and showing up exhausted. See you tomorrow."

Severus watched his fifth year class working on a particularly difficult potion. He was determined to weed out those that did not belong in his N.E.W.T. classes. Patrolling the aisles of the class, he cast his disapproving gaze left and right. Normally, he could count on the Ravenclaws to produce quality work, but not today. Their work was as abysmal as that of the Gryffindors.

Even though the class was not over, he knew that at least half of them would be failing for having bungled the instructions. While he had not seen any obvious mistakes from the rest of the class, he did not believe that more than three or four of the students would pass. Unsurprisingly, Julia was one of the students he thought would pass.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the cauldrons bubbling over. He turned to watch and saw the hapless students trying to sop up the overflow. As they both hurried to clean up the mess, they tipped over the cauldron. "Ten points from Ravenclaw...each."

When the bell rang, he snapped, "Samples of your potions to the front." As the students filed up to his desk, he gave them a disapproving glare. He noticed that Julia was the last person to bring her sample to the desk. She lingered at his desk. "Is there something you need, Miss MacLean?"

Before she could speak, Adrian appeared in the doorway. "Professor Snape, a word if you please."

Julia quickly gathered her books and left the room.

"What can I do for you?"

"Is something bothering you?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"You seem to be deducting an unusual number of points."

"The awarding and deducting of points is up to a professor's discretion. I cannot help it if my students have been particularly troublesome this week."

"No. I don't suppose you can. My door is always open if there's anything you'd like to discuss. I think it would be more productive than taking it out on the students."

"Is that all?" Severus was quickly tiring of this conversation.

"Yes. I'll let you prepare for your next class."

Once Adrian left, Severus tried to determine why Aurelia had not yet replied to his gift. He knew that full moon was coming, but that should not have stopped her from acknowledging him. Unless of course she had been too intimidated by his gift. He would give her a few more days. If she didn't respond... He wasn't sure what he would do, but he had a few more days to make a decision.

After eating dinner alone, Aurelia decided to go to the basement and check on her patient. She hadn't heard any noises coming from the cellar. In her mind, this was a good sign that the new variant of the potion was at least as effective as the old. Ideally, she was hoping to find a cure, but at a minimum, she hoped to refine the potion to make the transformations less physically taxing to improve recovery time.

She listened at the door for several seconds before unlocking it. With her wand at the ready, she slowly opened the door. The furry shape on the blankets looked up at her. "Well, this is interesting," she said as she observed Remus.

Normally, one could not tell a werewolf from a regular wolf, but it seemed as though her refinement to the Potion had changed that. While he by no means looked human, he did have human qualities. His nose and ears were not as pointed as they should have been, and his normally thick fur looked mangy.

Kneeling beside him, she began to examine him. He followed her directions as she examined his legs and teeth. His tail was also quite a bit shorter than it should have been. "This appears to be a step in the right direction. Did it hurt more than normal?" she asked. When he shook his head, she found that a good sign. "Did it hurt less?" Once again, he shook his head and she frowned. She had hoped to mitigate the pain, as that was something the others she had interviewed had complained about. "Sorry about that. I had hoped to make it more pleasant. I'll be back when the moon sets to let you out, and you can finish the night in the guest room."

Remus whimpered his thanks and curled back up in the nest of blankets.

She headed back upstairs and went to the library to make notes on her examination. The box on the corner of her desk teased her. She tried to ignore it until she could finish her work.

When she was done, she opened the box again and stared at the necklace inside. She had received the package three days ago, but had not yet found the time to write a letter to Severus thanking him for the gift. Of course, that assumed she knew what to say in that letter. Given all the work she had spent on the Wolfsbane the last three days, she hadn't had time to think about it.

Picking up the necklace and examining it, she was surprised that he had gotten her something so extravagant. Even a small sapphire like this must have set him back quite a bit. A part of her didn't feel right about keeping it; that she might be sending him the wrong signal. Of course, she wasn't even sure which signal she wanted to send to him.

Unfolding the piece of parchment that came with the necklace, she read it once again, hoping another reading would give her more clues to Severus' feelings.

Aurelia,

My best wishes to you for a very happy birthday. I regret that circumstances prevent me from delivering this gift in person. I hope that you enjoy it. If you are amenable, I would like to take you out to dinner Friday.

Sincerely,

Severus

It was late and she was tired. Perhaps tomorrow she would find the time to send him a letter.

A week had passed since Severus had sent Aurelia her birthday present. He had spent the week prior to her birthday debating whether or not he should send it to her. He had sent her his mother's necklace, a beautiful gold and sapphire necklace, but not one so large as to be obscene. After all, she had reacted favorably to the thank you present he had given her, though that had been much more practical.

He thought about the kiss she had given him the last time they had been together. It had not been a passionate kiss, but he thought it was something more than a kiss between friends. Not only had it been on the lips, but her lips had lingered on his. He began to get lost in his memory of the kiss. From the flush of her cheeks, he had suspected that she had felt the same things he had.

Now, he began to wonder if he had been wrong. After all, it had only been about a year since Death Eaters had killed her husband. She may not be ready for a relationship.

As he had very little experience in social graces, he began to think that his mother was correct, that his gift had been too forward, and that he had driven her away.

He had considered this before sending her the necklace. He had known that he was risking losing the only close friend he could ever remember having. Of course, she had not sent him an owl telling him not to stop by over the Christmas holidays, which started in a few days.

The post owls began swarming the Great Hall, and he looked up, eager to see if today was the day he was going to receive a reply, good or bad. She had never taken a week to respond to one of his letters, so he was prepared for her reply to be negative. If he did not receive a response today, he would ask Julia if her mother was well. That question should be benign enough not to draw the wrong sort of attention.

One of the last owls through the Great Hall deposited a letter in front of him. He gave the owl a strip of bacon and did his best not to tear into the letter. It wouldn't do for the students to see him acting like a hormonal teenager.

Dearest Severus,

My apologies for taking so long to thank you for the lovely necklace. It's been a very rough week. First, there was full moon, and then I was stuck at the hospital for the last four days working on a case. Thankfully, it's over and I finally have some time at home. Sadly, the number of poisonings has not gone down, they are still as popular as ever.

I'm utterly exhausted and don't feel like cooking. If you can get away from school, how about meeting me at the Three Broomsticks for dinner?

Again, thank you for the necklace. Though, it really is too much.

Yours,

Aurelia

He considered the letter for several moments, trying to determine if he had gone too far in giving it to her. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to go on.

The Headmaster leaned over and tried to sneak a peek at the letter. "How is your pen pal doing? It's been quite a while since you've received a letter."

Severus folded the letter. "Well, work has been busy." He had been very careful not to tell the Headmaster much about Aurelia. He preferred to keep his private life just that, private. "I have errands to run this evening and will not be attending dinner."

"Of course." The Headmaster gave Severus a smug smile.

Severus could see Lupin glancing down the table, trying to eavesdrop on the conversation. He was almost positive Lupin knew that Aurelia was his correspondent, but prudently, the werewolf had said nothing. With a sharp glare, he made Lupin return his attention to his breakfast.

A/N: I hope that you are enjoying this story. It's a fun one for me to work on, even it is one of the more difficult I have written. Zen Lady and nota have provided invaluable help as beta readers and people I can discuss ideas with.

There should be plenty of twists and turns for everyone. I know I have shocked myself a couple of times.

Additionally, if you are interested on more information about Eileen Snape, I have recently started posting [After the Awakening](#), which will parallel parts of this story and show events from Eileen's point of view.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 4

Severus arrived early at the Three Broomsticks and took the table in the corner. Since he wasn't sure what was going to happen, he preferred as much privacy as he could get in this public setting. While he waited, he tried to imagine the possible outcomes of the evening. He focused on the positive. After failing to capitalize on the previous kiss, he was determined not to let that happen again. Especially since that kiss had unleashed feelings he hadn't been aware of before.

When he noticed his glass of ale was nearly empty, he checked his watch and saw that it was nearly a quarter after the hour. It wasn't like Aurelia to be late.

"Severus, I'm so sorry. I overslept," Aurelia apologized as she took the seat across from him.

He was pleasantly surprised to see that she was wearing the necklace. "It's nothing to worry about. I've been enjoying my drink. The necklace looks lovely on you."

Aurelia blushed and placed her hand on the necklace. "It's quite lovely, but it really is too extravagant a gift."

He reached across the table and pulled her hand away from the necklace. "It's nothing. The necklace belonged to my mother, and it's been sitting in a box for more than twenty years. Something that beautiful should not be locked away, out of sight." He gave her a small smile.

She pulled her hand away from his. "But still..."

He interrupted. "It looks lovely, and I think it is the perfect birthday present for one who has been so loyal a friend." When she pulled her hand away from his, he felt a small measure of disappointment.

She smiled back. "All right." Eager to change the subject, she continued, "How have classes been? You haven't written me much about them lately."

"More of the usual. I am not holding out hope that any of my seventh years will be good enough for work at St. Mungo's. As I had feared, they have suffered from their two years under Slughorn's instruction." While he had excelled at Potions, he had never been one of Slughorn's favorites. "I believe I may still be able to salvage a few of the sixth years. He was always more concerned about his sphere of influence rather than holding the students to standards of excellence."

"How is your rewrite of Advanced Potions coming?"

Severus paused a few minutes, answering only after they had placed their orders. "Slowly. Between grading student work and the administrative duties of being Deputy, I have had little time to devote to that project. I hope to find more time this summer. Thankfully, the publisher has been quite understanding." They had discussed over research how some of the Potions were now out of date. Julia had been mostly responsible for his decision to revise the book, since she had discussed several of them with her mother throughout the first half of the year. While she might not be a N.E.W.T. student, many of the sixth years had asked her questions since she did seem to have some natural affinity for Potions.

"Well, if you'd like some help this summer, I'm available."

"I wouldn't want to intrude," he replied politely.

"Nonsense. We liked having you around last summer."

He tried not to get his hopes up at this statement.

They chatted pleasantly throughout dinner. Aurelia's discomfort over the necklace seemed to have vanished.

While settling the bill, Severus found that he didn't want her to leave just yet. "Would you care to walk with me a bit?" he asked. What he wanted to say to her, he didn't want to say in a public setting. Outside, they would have some privacy.

"Of course," she replied in a relaxed tone. The excellent dinner, the glass of ale, and the conversation centered on purely professional topics had all conspired to lull her into a pleasant state of somewhat weary contentment.

It was a crisp November evening, but without the wind, it was nevertheless quite pleasant. They walked down the road to Hogwarts in silence until they found themselves quite apart from any fellow travelers. Severus finally broke the silence and said, "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable when I gave you the necklace."

"It's all right. It's just been a long time since anyone other than Henry gave me jewelry," she replied sadly.

Not wanting to dampen the mood, he said, "You are a very special woman," he said. He paused a moment, trying to decide how to continue. "I thought you should know how much I appreciate everything you have done for me."

"It was nothing," she replied quietly.

"To you, maybe. You are a Healer and have devoted your life to helping people. To me, it meant a lot. Very few times in my life have I ever been the recipient of an act of kindness." It was hard for him to admit this truth, but now he finally had. Of course, she had seen him at his absolute worst. She had held his life in her hands and still she had let him live. She had seen a side of him that very few ever had.

"As you said, it is my job," she replied demurely.

By now, they were well out of town, and he stopped suddenly, forcing her to turn back to face him. "No one would have faulted you if I had succumbed to the poison. I'm sure that when you saved my life, you had no way to be sure where my loyalties lay. For that, I thank you." Placing his hand on her cheek, he slowly leaned toward her.

She shifted nervously and backed away from him. "Thank you for the dinner, Severus, but I must be going. I'm still quite exhausted."

Before he could say anything else, she was gone with a crack of Disapparition. Severus watched the spot where she had been. She had given him all the signs. He could not have been wrong! She had accepted his gift, and then she had come out to dinner with him. She had even flirted with him during the meal, of that, he was positive. He could not fathom what he had done wrong. Perhaps he should have listened to his mother and chosen a different gift. Why did women have to be so complicated? He kicked at the dirt before continuing up the road to Hogwarts.

Twice in a row, he had ruined a potentially romantic moment. Perhaps he had misread the signs. She was polite, and perhaps she was too polite to return the gift; she had protested at dinner that it was too extravagant. A part of him thought that he should just move on, forget about her, but he couldn't. The memory of the kiss and thoughts about what might have been, what might still be, invaded his thoughts. He had far too much invested in this to forget about her now.

He should have been used to the rejection. Normally, attractive women, ones whom he had not paid, did not bestow him much attention, and definitely not attention of a romantic nature. Aurelia had. She had treated him like a friend, and something more besides. Now, she was rejecting him, telling him that he wasn't good enough. Perhaps she felt that she had made a mistake when she had kissed him.

Aurelia thought about going to talk to Michelle, but it was getting late, and she knew David's family was staying with them. If she went over there, Mrs. Parker was sure to drag her into the house and ask her a million questions.

Instead, she went home and tried to make some sense of the evening over a glass of wine. First there was the necklace. She hadn't been sure how to react to that when she'd received it. True, when she and Severus had last parted, she had kissed him on the lips. But that had been nothing more than an odd impulse birthed from an awkward silence, hadn't it? Besides, he hadn't returned the kiss. They were just friends. That's what she believed as she drank her first glass of wine.

He must have taken that kiss as a sign that she was interested in something more than friendship. At first, he had made the gift seem innocent, just a token of gratitude. In hindsight, she realized that might not have been the case. He had looked at her in a way he never had before; she just hadn't noticed at the time. It was as though he was seeing her as a woman for the first time. But she had encouraged it, hadn't she?

By the time she had finished her second glass of wine, she was convinced that he did indeed want more. His behavior had been a sure indicator of that. And how had she behaved? She had run away. Now what would he think of her? First she encouraged his attention, now she was running away as soon he reciprocated.

Feeling the effects of the wine these drinks on top of what she had already imbibed at dinner the Three Broomsticks, she found it increasingly difficult to put together a coherent thought and decided she might as well turn in for the night. As she drifted to sleep, her mind replayed the evening's events, though in this version, she did not run away when he tried to kiss her and fell asleep wondering if his kiss would have been gentle and tentative or more forceful.

He paced in front of his desk. On the desk sat a clean sheet of parchment. He had already crumpled three drafts, and thrown them into the waste bin. This was the sort of thing that one did not generally put in a letter, and he was having a great deal of difficulty.

Finally, he sat down to try again.

My dear Aurelia,

It was very good to see you again. That necklace really does look lovely on you. The blue of the stone accentuates your eyes.

I apologize if I did anything to make you feel uncomfortable. I enjoy your company, and I would hate to think that by acting rashly, I have done anything to offend you.

He stopped and considered his next words carefully. He was supposed to spend some time over the Christmas holiday with her, but he wasn't sure how to phrase the rest of the letter.

If you would prefer that I not visit over the holidays to help with your work on the Wolfsbane Potion, I fully understand. I only hope that I have not done anything to jeopardize our friendship.

Your servant,

Severus

He looked at the letter. It was as good as he could make it. He had never been one for flowery prose, but then he doubted that was the sort of letter Aurelia wanted anyway. After all, they were both mature individuals, not lovestruck teenagers.

Before he could change his mind, he sealed it and summoned a post owl.

For two days he fretted, wondering if he had ruined it all. Of course, the students couldn't really tell the difference. That was one advantage of having a reputation for being a surly bastard.

Wednesday morning, the post owl brought him another letter. Thankfully, he was sitting at the end of the table and wouldn't have to suffer through the Headmaster's comments. Adrian was every bit as bad as Dumbledore in that regard. Sinistra, however, ignored his letter, giving him the privacy he desired.

Severus,

You are not the one who should be apologizing. I should be the one apologizing to you. You just caught me off guard, I was weary from all of the extra work that I have been attending to, and I was a little unnerved by the unexpected attention you showed me. I shouldn't have run.

We would be happy to have you stop by over the holidays at your convenience. I may take the girls in to London one day, but that will be the extent of our travels. If you let me know when you are coming, I'll make sure it's not that day.

I had a lovely time at dinner, and I wouldn't mind doing it again.

I look forward to your visit and will have the guest room prepared for you.

Yours truly,

Aurelia

He did his best to maintain his calm exterior. She was not angry with him, and was not spurning him. Now he just had to determine if she was encouraging him or not. He didn't want to drive her away.

Before his first class, he took the letter up to the library. He placed it on the desk in front of his mother. "Perhaps you can translate this for me?" She already knew about the events that had led to the letter he had written.

Eileen picked up the letter. After a few minutes, she said, "I don't think this needs any translation. It's friendly, as she's still inviting you for the holidays, and she did apologize. You said she was widowed only a year ago. I suppose it has to be a little frightening for her to be entering into another relationship."

"Especially one with me," he muttered.

"Now, Severus, don't be so hard on yourself. As you've said, she's already kissed you once. Just let her set the pace. Don't be too hasty with her." She would have said more, but students were entering the library. "Patience, Professor Snape. It will take time."

He picked up his letter and grunted as he left the library, nearly knocking over an unsuspecting first year.

Severus sighed. He was already late for Adrian's infernal Christmas party. He figured he was about as late as he could manage without someone coming to look for him. He sighed as he picked up the gift he had purchased. Fate continued her cruel twist on his life, and he had selected Lupin in the Secret Santa draw.

When he walked into the staff lounge, Adrian quickly moved to his side. "I was about to send Argus for you. I thought you had forgotten."

"I would never forget. I was merely detained with work. Where should I put the gift?"

"On the table. We'll hand them out later. Here, you'll feel better after a couple of these." Adrian handed Severus a glass of eggnog.

Severus took a sniff of the drink; he could tell immediately that it was laced with a copious amount of alcohol. He quickly decided that alcohol might make the evening more tolerable, especially as he observed Morris heading in his direction; he nearly drained the glass.

"It's a lovely evening, isn't it? I always enjoy watching the snow falling," she said cheerfully.

"I find one night very much like the next. Snow is just an added inconvenience."

"I've always liked the way the landscape looks so pure when covered in a new blanket of snow, and it does such a nice job muffling sound. You can easily imagine that you are the only person in the world."

"I find I have little problem imagining that," he said dryly.

"Yes, well, if you would let others get close to you, perhaps you wouldn't have that problem. I'd like to be your friend."

"I had the impression you were after Lupin's *friendship*."

"You know, it is possible to be friends with more than one person," she hinted.

"If you will excuse me, I need to refill my drink." As he walked away, he decided he would spend some time talking with Pomona. The two of them had always gotten along fairly well, and he generally found his conversations with her to be pleasant.

As he spoke with Pomona, he saw Eileen watching him from across the room. While her memory was now fully restored, but she had not yet chosen to reveal to anyone that she was not Irma Pince. He excused himself from his conversation with Pomona and followed Eileen into a secluded corner. "Have you decided?" he asked.

She sipped her eggnog. "It seems I really have little choice. My skill is as a librarian, and I find I rather enjoy the work. It may be best if Eileen Snape remains forgotten."

"The choice is yours. If you choose to reveal yourself, I will explain the situation to Adrian."

"Did I hear my name?" the headmaster asked jovially. He placed his arm around Severus' shoulder. "Come now. This is meant to be a party, not the two of you conspiring in the corner about the best punishments for detention or whatever dark subject you are both discussing. Let me get you some more eggnog before we hand out the presents."

That was the best news Severus had heard all night. Once they finished with the gift exchange, he could slip out the door and have the rest of the evening to himself.

"Everyone, your attention please. It's time for us to exchange gifts. You all know how this works, so everyone find your partner."

Severus retrieved his present from the table and walked across the room before shoving it into Lupin's hands. "Here." He started to walk away.

"Thanks, Severus. Don't you want to see me open it?"

"Not necessary. I know what it is." He noticed that Lupin had the box unwrapped and had no choice but to wait.

Lupin picked up the scarf and noticed that it was in Gryffindor red and gold. "Thank you."

"I can't have one of my heads of house wearing that embarrassingly tattered scarf you favor. Especially at Quidditch matches."

Lupin tried not to smile. "Of course. I had planned on replacing mine, but... Well, I hadn't quite gotten there, yet. If you'll excuse me."

After Lupin left, Severus looked around the room, wondering who had drawn his name. He was dismayed when he saw Morris crossing the room toward him. Anyone but her. He would have preferred White.

She handed him an elaborately wrapped box. "I hope you like it."

He tried not to roll his eyes. Adrian had cornered him after lunch and reminded him that he needed to be polite. He then realized that she was waiting for him to unwrap the gift. Rather than tearing into the paper like a heathen, he carefully unwrapped the box. He was almost afraid of what he would find inside. It was a mass of green wool.

As he picked up the contents of the box, Morris said proudly, "I made it myself."

He tried to conceal his horror as he saw a green jumper, reminiscent of those Molly Weasley gave her children. "Thank you."

"I thought you might find it useful. You know, living in the dungeon and all. I know it can get cold down there."

"I'm sure I will," he replied politely. What he really wanted was to incinerate the thing right then and there, but he knew that would be rude.

"Kalliope, dear, I have your gift," said Poppy.

Severus said a silent blessing for Poppy's good timing and slipped out of the staff room. Rather than going to his quarters, where Adrian would surely find him, he decided to go for a walk and consider how the next few weeks at Aurelia's house would unfold. He wasn't even sure he would spend the entire time there, anymore.

When Aurelia returned home from King's Cross with her daughters, she was surprised to see a flower hanging in her doorknocker.

"Who's it from, Mum?" asked Julia.

Aurelia pulled the rose from its perch. It didn't have a note, only a blue ribbon tied around the stem. "I have no idea." Once they were inside the house, she inhaled the flower's scent before placing it in a vase. She nearly dropped the vase when she thought she heard the word 'Tomorrow' being uttered. Looking around the room, she saw she was alone.

Examining the flower, she noticed the blue of the ribbon was the same blue as her sapphire. *Could this be a message from Severus?* she wondered. It seemed odd, but then again, he did specialize in obscure magic. The small gesture made her smile.

A/N: Sorry for the delay in posting a new chapter. My muses are being uncooperative. I actually have the next couple of chapters written, but there is still some work to be done. I'm working with the wonderful Zen Lady to keep Snape Snape. I think I have chapter 5 sorted out and hope to post it next week.

For those that have asked about Irma/Eileen, her story is definitely an interesting one. The questions and comments from reviewers are encouraging me to take a closer look at that. I don't think that it would integrate well into this story, as it is the story of Aurelia and Severus. I will look at writing a little companion fic that will explore events from her point of view. I'm trying to finish up Redemption right now (I'm on chapter 24), but after that is done, this little project may come to the forefront.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 5

Severus knocked on Aurelia's door mid-afternoon. He had hoped to arrive in the morning, but he had been bombarded with last minute paperwork. Hopefully, he would not have to concern himself with anything related to Hogwarts over the next two weeks.

Julia answered the door. "Good afternoon, Professor. We've been expecting you. Mum's down in the cellar."

"Thank you." After taking his bag to the guest room, he headed to the cellar. When he opened the door, he was not pleased with what he heard.

Aurelia was laughing. "Oh, Remus, that is just too much."

"I thought you might appreciate it."

What was the werewolf doing here? He was not due to take his Wolfsbane potion for another three days. Severus scowled as he descended the stairs.

Remus was the first to see him. "Good afternoon, Severus."

Aurelia paused in her work. "Welcome. We were wondering when you might arrive. Remus, could you hand me the dried Mandrake."

Severus grimaced at the fact that Lupin was familiar with where she kept her ingredients as he watched that creature head directly for the proper jar. The two of them had obviously been spending a great deal of time together. Time she had not seen fit to tell him about.

As she chopped the Mandrake into tiny pieces, she said, "This will be ready to simmer in a few minutes."

Remus, not wanting to endure Snape's glare, replied, "I'll go upstairs and make sure dinner is off to a good start."

Severus watched Lupin ascend the stairs. Once the door was closed, he asked, "What *is* he doing here?"

Aurelia finished chopping the Mandrake, added it to the cauldron and began stirring the potion. "Answering a few questions for me. I needed to know some of his medical history."

"And he's staying for dinner?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

Severus thought for several seconds before replying. "It's bad enough that I have to suffer his presence during the school year. I had thought that I would get a respite during the holidays."

She momentarily paused in her stirring. "I would have hoped that the two of you had gotten past that. You were at least civil to each other while we were on the Lethifold hunt."

"My free time is limited, and I prefer to choose the company of those I share it with." When she chose to ignore him, he continued. "What were the two of you laughing about before I arrived?"

"He was telling me some amusing anecdotes to pass the time," she replied casually.

"About me, no doubt," he said bitterly.

"No. They were not about you. We have not discussed you very much." She saw him arch his eyebrow. "Contrary to popular belief, the world does not revolve around you." His expression did not improve. She had a thought about that and couldn't control the smile. "Are you jealous that I'm spending time with him?"

"Do not try and change the subject."

She retorted, "I'm not trying to change the subject. I've told you, he's just a friend, someone who understands what I've been through."

"And what am I?" he asked before he realized what he had just said. He was not the sort of person that usually discussed his feelings. His conversations with his mother must be affecting his judgment. While it was a question he had longed to ask, he feared to have it answered. Without the answer, he could continue to imagine the possibility that she saw him as something more than a friend, perhaps even a lover. Her answer could destroy that possibility.

She stared at him in silence for several seconds, not quite sure how to answer that question.

"What am I?" he asked quietly. She was not answering. His suspicion that she preferred the werewolf seemed likely to be confirmed. He knew it had been wrong to hope that she felt something for him. The kiss had been a fluke; she would be like all the others.

Looking away from him, she replied, "I don't know. More than a friend..."

Tentatively, he reached out for her, but, unsure if she would welcome his touch, he held himself back. "How much more?" Now that the question was asked, he would have an answer, even if it was one he dreaded.

"I don't know, yet. It hasn't been that long since Henry died."

Severus stepped away at the mention of her husband. Now, he knew where he stood, and it was behind a memory.

Turning to face him, she said, "Severus, don't go. It's just hard for me, but I do like you." She paused a few seconds. "I just want to take things slowly."

He could swear that she sounded scared, something he was not used to her showing. Stepping back toward her, he asked, "How slow?"

"I don't know." She turned away from him and hugged herself. "If you can be patient with me... I know I've acted odd lately..." her voice trailed off and she began pacing.

He wasn't quite sure what to say at this point. This was a completely unfamiliar situation for him. "I need you to trust me if I am to be 'more than a friend.'"

"I do trust you," she said quietly.

"Then I need you to talk to me. To help me to understand what it is you want, what you mean." He had no basis of reference for anything he was experiencing, or what exactly she meant by 'more than a friend'.

"I'll do my best. Can you be patient with me?"

"I will try to be patient, but you are aware that is not my strong suit, aren't you?"

She laughed at his self-deprecating joke. Almost immediately, she realized that he had not been making a joke. "I'm sorry. I wasn't laughing at you."

"Oh no?" he asked as he arched an eyebrow. "You believe that I would make a joke by insulting myself?"

"I'm sorry. I used to joke around... I momentarily forgot that's not the sort of thing you would do." After several long seconds of uncomfortable silence, she turned to face him. "I think we should go upstairs and see how dinner is progressing."

Severus was thankful that Lupin left shortly after dinner. When they retired to the living room, Helen pulled the Parcheesi game from the shelf. "Would you like to play a game?"

Remembering his previous failure at this game, Severus was not inclined to play, but everyone else was interested, and he realized this was the best way to spend time with Aurelia. They gathered around the coffee table and he found himself sitting across from her.

Throughout the game, he kept catching her glancing at him. He found that for once in his life, he did not mind losing. He would prove to her that he was worthy of her attention. Helen managed to win both games. In the second game, he noticed that Aurelia made quite a show of sending one of his pieces back to the starting point. "Sorry," she apologized with a playful grin.

When the game was over, Aurelia had the girls put away the game and she collected the dishes.

He followed her and leaned against the doorframe to the kitchen while she cleaned the dishes, admiring the curves of her body as she used charms to do the dishes. When she turned around, he asked, "Would you care for a nightcap?"

"Not tonight, I think. It's been a rather busy day, and I have to get up early tomorrow," she replied nervously, not meeting his eyes.

"You have to work?" This was something he had not anticipated.

"The hospital doesn't close for the holidays. I'll see you in the morning." She smiled at him a few seconds before saying, "Girls, time to get ready for bed."

"But, Mum, we're on vacation," protested Julia.

"That doesn't mean there are no rules. Upstairs." She followed her daughters upstairs.

He watched her walk upstairs, feeling his heart pounding in his chest. He had hoped that she would have stayed and that they could have talked. There were many questions that he wanted answered, but he was getting the impression she was afraid to be alone with him. He wanted to understand that fear, but he couldn't do that unless they spent time together.

Retiring to the library, he poured a drink and tried to make sense of the day's events. She had invited him to stay for the holidays, which indicated that she liked him. She had admitted as much in the cellar. But now that he was here, he was being ignored. As soon as they had started to have a real conversation downstairs, she had looked for a reason to leave.

What he really needed was a guide to female emotions; something to translate her behavior into something he could understand.

Aurelia felt guilty. She had invited Severus here, but now she was not spending much time with him. Every time she was alone with him, what she felt scared her. From the way he looked at her, she knew that he found her attractive. When she flirted with him, she could get him to smile. It wasn't much of a smile, but it made quite an improvement in his appearance. And the fact that he had given her that necklace for her birthday meant he felt something for her.

She thought she might feel the same thing, but she still wasn't sure she was ready for that. When he had asked her where he stood with her, she had been truthful that she didn't know. Consequently, she did not trust herself to be alone with him. It was completely irrational, but it was unavoidable. The rational part of her mind knew that talking to him was what she should do, what he needed her to do. Their conversation in the cellar the other day had not been much, but she wasn't sure what else to say. He had already admitted that he had little experience in relationships. She didn't think she could possibly cover everything in one short discussion.

She wanted to move forward, but the memories of the past haunted her, held her back. They were not something she wanted to talk about, as necessary as it might be. The last two nights, he had tried to get her to stay and talk after the girls had gone to bed, and she had told him that she needed to get some rest for work. It wasn't really the truth, but it was the only way she could see to avoid dealing with her feelings.

"Are you okay, Mum?" Helen asked.

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

"You seem distracted. Are you going downstairs to talk to Professor Snape?"

"Not tonight. I have to get up early for work."

"You should spend more time with him."

"Oh, really?"

"Really. I like him. He's nice to me." Helen smiled slyly and sat up. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Aurelia was curious about her daughter's behavior. "Of course."

Helen cupped her hand and whispered, "I think he likes you. Has he kissed you?"

Aurelia gently pushed Helen against the bed. "Good night, young lady," she said sternly.

"I won't mind if you do."

Aurelia arched an eyebrow at her daughter before dousing the lights and closing the door.

Once she was alone in her room, she considered Helen's words. At least one of her daughters approved of her having a relationship with Severus. She started pacing and decided that nothing would be gained from talking with Severus tonight other than frustrating them both.

While Helen might approve of the relationship, what would everyone else think? After all, he had been her patient not that long ago. Of course, Michelle seemed to think that enough time had passed. Aurelia just wasn't sure. It had been sixteen years since the last time she had been courted, and she had been incredibly nervous then. Then again, she had invited him for the holidays, knowing how he felt about her.

Deciding she needed to relax, she drew a bath before turning in for the night.

Snape was at breakfast, reading the paper. He had gotten up early in the hopes of having a pleasant and relaxing conversation with Aurelia, but she had not stayed long, barely getting anything to eat. He was frustrated with how she seemed to be avoiding him. Helen was sitting across from him, eating her cereal.

Helen asked, "Do you like Mum?"

"I beg your pardon?" He wanted to ensure that he had indeed heard the question correctly.

"Do you like Mum?"

"Your mother is a good friend."

"Is that all?"

He couldn't believe he was discussing his love life with an eleven year old. "We are friends." He buried his head back behind his paper.

"Did you know she likes you?"

He almost choked on his tea. "Didn't your mother task you and your sister with cleaning up the yard today?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Then I suggest you wake her, so the two of you can finish before the impending storm."

"Yes, sir," she replied sullenly.

He couldn't believe Helen's audacity. She may have been sorted into Slytherin, but she still had a great many things to learn about scheming. Her tactic was far too obvious. For a moment, Severus considered using Helen as a way to get Aurelia to speak with him, but then he decided that would not work. Still, one way or another, he would get Aurelia to confide in him tonight.

Severus had decided to go searching for obscure books rather than spending all day at the house alone. The girls were with their friends, and Aurelia had to work, though she would be taking time off between Christmas and New Year's. He was able to find a few books that he had been looking for. Unfortunately, most of the rare books were being purchased to replenish the Hogwarts library. He almost felt guilty acquiring these books for his personal use, but he knew these books had no purpose in students' hands. In fact, by acquiring these books for his personal use, he was ensuring they would not cause trouble in the library.

When he finished shopping, he realized it was still early and decided to see if he could gain insight into Aurelia's behavior from his mother. Her advice had been sound in the past.

He found her in the nearly deserted library. "Severus? What are you doing here? Did something go wrong?"

He glared at the two second years seated at the table, and they quickly gathered their bags and hurried out of the library. With a wave of his wand, he locked the door. "Not exactly wrong. Truthfully, I'm not sure how it's going."

"Whatever do you mean?" She conjured a tea service and poured for them both.

"She seems to be avoiding me. I am almost tempted to say that she doesn't want me there, but she is quite friendly when her children are around."

Eileen sipped her tea as she considered her reply. "Have you made any progress?"

He ignored his tea and was pacing, lost in thought. "She admitted that I am more than a friend. I couldn't get her to commit more than that." He spun to face his mother. "Oh, I forgot to mention, the werewolf was there, laughing and joking with her when I arrived."

"Remus?"

"How many werewolves do we know? Of course it was Lupin."

"And you worry she is choosing him over you?"

"I don't know. She claims they are nothing more than friends who have suffered similar losses, but..."

"It is possible for a man and a woman to be friends. You were friends with Minerva for a number of years."

"That's different. She was much older. He's our age."

"Unless you think she was hiding something from you, you should take her word that they are just friends. Did she say anything other than admitting that you are more than a friend?"

"She said she wants to take it slow. What does that mean? How do you take something slow? You either care about someone or you don't."

A broad smile spread across Eileen's face. "She does care about you."

"Funny way of showing it," he interrupted.

"She's scared. I felt the same way after your father died."

"What? I thought you would have been relieved to be free of that bastard." The last thing he wanted was his mother making a comparison with Aurelia. "Her husband was not a brutal, heartless bastard. From everything I can gather, he was well loved, well respected, everything I'm not. What does she see in me?"

"Ask her."

He froze in his tracks. "Are you daft?"

"You are never going to move your relationship forward if you don't talk openly with her. If she were to talk with me, I would give her the same advice I'm giving you. I don't know what she means about moving slow, you are going to have to ask her."

This was not the answer he wanted to hear. He wanted a solution, a translation of female emotions. "It's getting late. I should be returning."

"Talk to her, Severus. Ask her questions," she called to his retreating back.

Returning to her house, he was surprised that it seemed to be deserted. Aurelia should have been home from work by now. He walked toward the kitchen to see if she had left a note, and he noticed the door to the cellar was open. He could hear noises coming from downstairs and went to investigate. "Aurelia?"

"Down here," she called.

He noticed that she seemed to be emptying out her storage room. "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for Remus' arrival."

"He's going to transform here?" Severus asked in surprise.

"How else can I keep an eye on him?"

"Your children are here. What if something goes wrong?"

"It went well last month. I have hopes that this month will be an improvement even over that. Besides, I have a laboratory here with an impressive potions stock to treat any side effects, and a direct Floo connection to St. Mungo's."

"But what if he gets loose? You are risking your children's safety, not to mention your own." He couldn't believe that she was going to go through with this.

"I'll have you know my father built this house. There is no way that Remus can escape. I have applied a number of charms to that door to ensure there is no way he can break through it. I have taken all necessary precautions. Remember, I have dealt with werewolves before, including transformed ones. Now, you can either help or leave," she replied defensively.

Deciding the only way he could protect her from this ridiculous idea was to stay, he replied tersely, "I'll assist you."

They worked silently for nearly a minute before she said, "You know what your problem is? Your ego can't handle the fact that anyone can do anything better than you."

"My ego?" he shot back. "I think that your ego is by far worse than mine. Belby spent his entire life working on the Wolfsbane Potion and he was never able to get any further than allowing the patient to retain his sanity. Now, you think that you can cure lycanthropy in a matter of months just because you are in love with a werewolf?"

"I am not in love with Remus. I've told you that," she replied forcefully as she slammed the box to the floor.

He crossed his arms. "Oh, no? Then how do you explain your behavior?" One way or another, he would get her to admit her feelings and find out where he stood.

She stared at him for several seconds before returning to her work. "Severus Snape, you are a foolish man."

"Yes, I am."

She was taken aback that he agreed with her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You led me on, gave me hope where there was none."

She stopped moving boxes out of the storage room. "I did what?"

"You heard me. You acted as though you cared about me, treated me well, just so you could use my knowledge. You're no better than anyone else who has ever used me."

She closed the distance and started poking him in the chest with her finger, fire burning in her eyes. "Take that back."

Raising himself to his full height, he replied, "I most certainly will not."

"After everything I've done, I don't know how you can say that. Just because I care about making the wizarding world a better place, and happen to be doing it without your help, does not mean that you can treat me like this. I have told you before, if you are going to be rude, you are not welcome in my house." She placed her hands on her hips, insulted by his accusation.

"But it is acceptable for you to be rude to me?" he retorted.

"You are an exasperating man."

Her cheeks were flushed and he saw that her eyes were dilated. While she was trying to be angry with him, he didn't think that was truly the case. He didn't think she had ever looked more beautiful. "And you are an infuriating woman."

"I am not."

"Oh, no?" He took a step closer to her. "You flirt with me, send me signals that you are interested, yet at the same time you find ways to push me away. And you have been avoiding me ever since our last conversation."

"I haven't been avoiding you," she replied guiltily.

"Why must you play these games with me? I thought we were old enough that we didn't have to do that." He looked into her pale eyes, trying to discern what she thought about him.

"We are."

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked softly as he took another step toward her. He could see the blush of her cheeks. She could deny her attraction all she wanted, but her body betrayed her mind. He just needed her to realize that.

"No, it's just..." She didn't get a chance to finish, because he trapped her against the wall with his arms. After staring into her eyes for a few seconds, he captured her mouth in a passionate kiss. She momentarily struggled half-heartedly before giving in to her passions and returning the kiss with equal ardor.

Severus was pleased to feel her wrap her arms around him. He let his hands do exploring of their own, feeling the curves of her body. She started moaning and pulling him tightly to her, encouraging him to continue. He could feel her hands sliding down his back, caressing him. He enjoyed the way she rubbed up against him, and he pushed her against the worktable. Longing to feel her bare skin, he slipped his hand underneath her skirt.

"Aurelia? Are you down here?" Remus called from the top of the stairs.

Aurelia and Severus quickly separated, trying to act like nothing had happened. "Yes," she replied.

When Remus descended the stairs, he said, "Hello, Severus," before turning his attention back to Aurelia. "Is everything ready?"

"Just about. I have a few more things to move out of the storage room. Your potion is on the table." She avoided making eye contact with Remus, feeling guilty about what had just happened.

He looked at the smoking goblet. "Wonderful, thanks," he replied sarcastically.

Aurelia saw Severus leaving and wanted to stop him, but thought that drawing attention to him was not the best idea at the moment. "I'll work on the taste once we have the potion refined. There's no point in focusing on how it tastes yet."

He sighed. "I know." Lending a hand, they had the rest of the stuff cleaned out of the storage area in short order. "So, you and Severus?"

"Me and Severus what?" she asked innocently.

"He's a good man. A tad rough around the edges, but a good man. I'm glad to see he has a friend in you. He's not particularly close to any of the rest of us."

"He's not an easy man to be friends with." This wasn't a conversation she was comfortable having. She still didn't know what she wanted. No, that was not entirely true. She knew what she wanted, she just wasn't sure when, and the kiss had only served to further confuse her.

Remus chuckled softly. "No, I imagine not. I don't think friendship is something he's had much experience with. I've, uh, worked with him the last few years, and if you have any questions about him, I'd be more than happy to answer them."

"I'll keep that in mind." She knew that Severus was not happy with the amount of time she already spent with Remus. Somehow she doubted that increasing it would improve her relationship with him. She still couldn't believe that he had kissed her, that she had kissed him back, that they would have done more if Remus hadn't arrived.

But Remus was in a position of being able to understand her situation more than anyone else. "Is it too soon?" she asked before she lost her nerve.

"No. Moonrise is in about fifteen minutes. The timing is just right."

"Not that. For Severus. Is it too soon for me to think about another man romantically?"

He set the last box down and moved closer to her. "Sadly, you are the only one who can answer that question. I know you've told me that you accept Henry's death, and that is the first important step. If you truly have accepted that, and you are now ready to open your heart to someone else, it is not too soon. And you are one of the few people I know who can tolerate being in close quarters with him."

They both laughed at his joke. "How did you know?"

He gave her a sly grin. "I teach teenagers at a boarding school. Do you know how many times I have walked into a deserted area of the castle and seen that same attempt to hide guilt?"

He took a look around the dark room. "It's nearly time. I guess I'll see you later?"

"I'll come back and check on you about an hour after moonrise."

"Aurelia, be careful. We don't know what your modifications will do."

"Don't worry. I'm always careful." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Good luck."

She tried to determine what she would say to Severus. Remus' words had provided some comfort, had confirmed that she wasn't totally insane. As she thought about it, the heady rush of that first kiss caused her to blush. Remus had mentioned teenagers, and that was exactly how she felt. The only thing to do now was to ask Severus about the kiss.

She found Severus in the library. "What was the meaning of that?" she asked cautiously.

He put down the book he had been reading. "Meaning of what?"

"What do you think? The kiss."

"I thought you rather enjoyed it," he replied as he rose to his feet.

She shifted her stance. "That's not the point. We discussed..."

"No. We haven't discussed anything. You have been avoiding me."

"I have not. I've had a lot of work to do in preparation for the end of the year and taking some time off." That was the truth, wasn't it? Or was he right? Was she avoiding him? Even though she had known him for more than six months, things all seemed to be moving much too quickly.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She had enjoyed the kiss, and part of her wanted another one. Her resolve was fading. Suddenly, she didn't think she could have this discussion. "I should get dinner started," she stammered as he took a step toward her.

"It can wait." He took another step toward her.

"The girls will be home soon." She was desperately looking for a reason to flee, afraid to face the emotions boiling to the surface.

"Not for about an hour," he whispered, the lust clear in his voice.

"Severus," she protested weakly. He was so close. She could easily reach up and kiss him again. His breath was hot on her cheek.

She could feel herself on the verge of losing control again, and it frightened her. She should be able to control her impulses. When he leaned forward to kiss her, she tried to pull back, but he had his fingers wrapped in her hair. Her resistance melted as his lips met hers. This was what she wanted, whether she was willing to admit it or not. Wrapping her arms around him, she deepened the kiss.

He backed toward the sofa, and fell on it rather awkwardly, pulling her with him. There was no doubt in her mind how he felt about her. His hands were caressing her back, lacing through her hair. She slid her hands under his shoulders, and trailed them down his side. Once again, she found herself enjoying the pleasure of being close to another person. After several seconds, she pulled away, gasping for air. "Severus, no." She started pulling away.

He pulled her back on top of him. "'No' what?"

"Not like this." Halfheartedly, she tried to pull away. She wasn't sure she was ready to face the myriad of emotions that being with him invoked.

He shifted around so that he was on top. She wasn't going to escape quite that easily. "Not like what? Not with me?"

"No, that's not what I mean." She didn't get to finish as they suddenly heard a loud banging coming from the cellar.

Severus tried to hold her close. "Ignore him." He wanted his answers now.

The banging kept coming in groups of three. "I can't do that. Something might be wrong." They heard a howl echoing up from the cellar. She pulled harder against his grip. "Something's not right."

He sighed and let her up, knowing that she wasn't going to change her mind.

When they arrived at the cellar, he held his wand at the ready. "You aren't really going to open that door, are you? You heard the howl." To accentuate his statement, another howl came from behind the door.

She could hear the pain behind the howl and knew she needed to aid Remus if she could. After all, she was responsible for his current predicament. "Look, if he wasn't in his right mind, he wouldn't be able to bang in groups of three, would he?" she rationalized. Remus was alternately banging on the door and howling.

"I expect not. Still, you should stand back, and we'll open the door magically. If he tries to attack, we can stun him. If both of us do so at the same time, it should throw him back in the room long enough for us to lock the door again."

Moving away from the door, she acquiesced, "Fine."

Severus opened the door, and they both froze in shock at what they saw.

A/N: First and foremost, my unending thanks to Zen Lady and nota for their help and patience in bouncing chapters back and forth to achieve the finished product. Any time I try to diverge too wildly, they smack me around and bring me back to my senses.

I know, those kisses were a little tease and that's quite a cliffhanger. Those are the sorts of things I live for. This story is flowing quite nicely and I have parts of the next two chapters to beta. I couldn't even begin to predict how long it will be as the muses can be quite verbose at times.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 6

Aurelia's first impulse was to rush into the room, but Severus grabbed her arm. "Let me go," she insisted.

"He could be dangerous," Severus cautioned.

"He's not dangerous, he would have attacked us already. He's in pain." She pulled away from him and knelt at Remus' side. He was more man than wolf; it was as though the transformation had been frozen midway. "Remus, can you hear me?" His face definitely had a very human quality; she noticed he seemed more comfortable upright rather than on all fours, and the fur covering his body was much more sparse than it had been last time. She could clearly see his skin.

"Yeah," he said somewhat indistinctly, as though he could not fully form the words with a mouth that was not quite human.

"Are you in pain?"

"Yeah." He whimpered in a distinctly canine fashion as she examined him.

Looking into his eyes, she could tell that he was not lying. "Severus, get the Pain Relieving Potion on the second shelf." While she was waiting for the potion, she cast a quick diagnostic spell on Remus, and then frowned.

"What?" he asked.

"The pain is because your transformation was halted before the process was complete. This potion will help, though it might not be completely effective. I'm sorry."

"Okay," he panted.

Severus returned, a scowl firmly planted on his face as he handed her the potion. "Your potion."

She took the bottle from him and conjured a small glass. Turning her attention back to Remus, she said, "Tip your head back." Once he had obliged, she poured the potion down his throat.

He howled softly before replying, "Thank you". He reached his partially transformed hand out and gently placed it on hers.

"Let me make you more comfortable," she said, and conjured a cot for him.

"What are you doing?" Severus demanded.

"Look at him. I can't just let him sleep on the floor." She helped Remus onto the cot and covered him with the blanket. He continued his whimpering. Once again, she gave him an appraising look, still not satisfied with what she saw. "I can't give you a Sleeping Draught. It wouldn't react well with the Wolfsbane. At least the pain potion should help some." Gently she brushed his hair, trying to comfort him. "I'll come check on you again later." She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze before turning to leave.

"Light," he muttered as he brushed a lock of hair to the side, away from his face.

With a wave of her wand, she lit the lamp on the wall.

Once she closed the door, Severus demanded, "Are you mad? You've given him fire, furniture, just think of the damage he could do!"

"Severus, you saw him. He's in full control of his faculties. There was no danger in allowing him a few comforts. Besides, the lamp is attached to the wall. He can hardly

even stand." She started walking upstairs, not wanting to get into an argument where Remus could hear them. The fact that Severus didn't try to start one surprised her. There was something more that needed to be discussed, and she didn't think it could wait.

Severus followed her back upstairs, hoping to resume where they had left off, but he could tell from her body language that something was bothering her.

As she stepped into the living room, she said, "About what happened earlier..."

The color drained from Severus' face. "What about it?" he asked tentatively. He was about to hear what he had feared. She was going to tell him that it had all been a mistake.

"I really enjoyed it, it's just..." She looked away from him as her voice trailed off.

"Just what?" he asked tersely. It was coming. This was why he should have walked away, never taken the risk. He braced himself for the kick that was coming.

She replied nervously, "I think we should get to know each other a little better first. I don't want to rush things and end up making a mess of it.

He was stunned into silence. She wasn't rejecting him. In fact, she had just more or less stated that she could see a future with him.

"Severus?"

He looked into her eyes. "You...aren't rejecting me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I..." He realized there was no good answer to this question.

"Why don't you give me a hand with dinner?" she asked gently.

He followed her into the kitchen. "I thought we knew each other quite well." He was so excited at the prospect of her accepting him that little else was penetrating his mind.

With a wave of her wand, she summoned the ingredients she needed for dinner. "As friends, yes..."

He could hear the hesitation in her voice, and that she wanted to say something more. Meeting her eyes, he arched an eyebrow, letting her know she could continue.

Turning back to her meal preparations, she said, "If you could do the vegetables? I mean, we get along all right. I enjoy spending time with you." Looking over her shoulder, she prompted, "The carrots?"

Snapped out of his thoughts, he asked, "What? Right." After he set the knife to chopping the carrots, he replied, "As do I." He didn't want to be too overt and risk her thinking he was desperate.

After a long silence, she said quietly, "I just... This is really hard for me, too."

He raised an eyebrow, surprised to hear her admit her feelings. "Perhaps we should discuss this further after dinner?"

Giving him a soft smile, she answered, "I think maybe we should."

After dinner, he was able to get her to stay downstairs for once after the girls had gone to bed. He forced himself to maintain his calm and not appear too eager, as difficult as it was. He was aided by the fact that she chose to sit in the chair. He chose to sit on the sofa in the hopes that she would change her mind and join him.

After half an hour of innocuous conversation, he said, "You could join me on the sofa. I promise to act the perfect gentleman."

She looked as though she was seriously considering his words. "I don't know."

"Aurelia, please."

Tentatively, she sat next to him, and after a little coaxing leaned against him. "That's not so bad, is it?"

"No. It's quite nice, actually."

He noticed that she seemed to be relaxing, and that pleased him. "I thought we could exchange presents tomorrow evening after the girls go to sleep. Something private."

"Should I be worried about what you have gotten me?"

"Not at all. I assure you that it will not embarrass you. I'm glad you decided to keep me company tonight."

"It's just hard for me to get used to someone else. After so many years with the same person..."

"This isn't exactly easy for me, either. I don't have a lot of dating experience."

"We'll figure it out." After a few seconds, she asked, "You didn't have any plans for New Year's, did you?"

"Nothing specific."

"The hospital is throwing a ball and I'm sort of expected to attend... If you'd like, I'd be honored to have you as my escort."

He was speechless. She was asking him out on a date, to a New Year's Ball at that. His heart sank as he realized there would be dancing, something he normally avoided like the plague. He also wasn't sure he was ready for this step. By going to the Ball with her, he would be announcing his intentions to the world.

"Severus?" She pulled away and looked at him.

"I would be honored to go with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, you took quite a while to answer. Why was that?"

He didn't want to tell her the whole truth. "If you must know, I am not the type of person who enjoys dancing."

She gave him an affectionate smile. "I won't make you dance if you don't want to. I just need you not to get upset if others ask me to dance."

He hadn't considered that. "I will do my best." He brushed a stray lock of hair away from her forehead and leaned down to kiss her. When he finally broke contact, he tried to remember what he had overheard in the common room years ago about kissing a woman. Though he had to admit, information overheard from hormonal teenagers twenty years ago might not be the best source of information regarding how to treat a woman. He started kissing her neck and in response, he felt her lacing her fingers through his hair.

Gently she pulled his head back and rested her forehead on his. She was panting softly. "We shouldn't be doing this."

He didn't quite believe the sincerity of her words. "Why not?"

She pulled away from him and moved toward the door. "First and foremost, my children are upstairs. Secondly, this goes against the decision we just made to take our time." She paused. "Now, I think I'd better get a few hours sleep before the moon sets."

He had forgotten about Remus. It was an easy thing to do, with her in his arms. "See you in a few hours?" he asked softly, hoping to build on the progress he had made.

"All right. Goodnight." She smiled warmly at him.

"Goodnight." After giving her one last kiss, he let her go upstairs. Leaning back on the couch, he mused that this situation was definitely improving. She had willingly sat next to him, invited him to the New Year's Ball, and hinted at the possibility they might one day be lovers. That was the best sign yet. He would have to return to the castle and get his Dress Robes. Perhaps his mother's advice had not been that bad after all. He would continue to let Aurelia set the pace, but he would gently prod her along, softly pushing to expand her comfort zone.

Thinking of the future, he headed upstairs to bed, tossing and turning, suffering from a horrible case of sexual frustration. He should have pushed her. It was clear that she cared for him. After all, she had mentioned that she could see them as lovers. It would have been easy to convince her. *No. She is special. I must be patient with her. Let her come to me.* Realizing that he wasn't going to get any sleep unless he relieved this tension, he reached beneath the covers, hoping this would be the last time he would have to take care of himself. It was so easy to imagine her hands wrapped around his throbbing shaft.

When Aurelia woke after the moon set and dawn approached, she thought about waking Severus, but could hear the snores coming from his room and decided to let him sleep. After all, she shouldn't require any help. Remus should be fully recovered.

After standing outside the door a few moments, she decided it was safe to enter. "How do you feel?" she asked gently.

"Very sore."

"Interesting." She cast a diagnostic spell. "I can't detect anything amiss. I assume that since you were in pain the whole time the moon was up, your nerves have a residual memory. It should fade in a few hours. I don't want to give you any more Pain Relieving Potion in case it isn't residual, but I can give you a Sleeping Draught."

"That would be appreciated."

"Well then, let's get you upstairs. I'll give you the potion once you are settled. Do you think you can stand?" She knew that he was very independent and would want to do this on his own if he could manage it.

He nodded. "I think so." With Aurelia's help, he was able to rise to his feet. Slowly, the two of them made their way upstairs.

She was grateful the banisters were available for him to lean on as they climbed the stairs. "Did you want to rest?" she asked once they had made it out of the cellar.

"No. Let's just get it over with."

By the time she lowered him to Helen's bed, she had grown even more concerned about his well-being. He looked quite pale and was panting heavily. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Just tired. I didn't really get any sleep."

She helped him get settled on the bed and sat next to him. "Drink this. It'll knock you out for a couple of hours. When I come back, I'll bring some breakfast and ask you some questions. I'll try to figure out where we should start next month."

He gripped her arm as she got up to leave. "You are going to abandon this line?"

"I have to. It's not working."

"You mustn't. It is working. Don't you see! You halted the transformation. If you can determine how, perhaps you can make it act even more quickly, stop it before it's too late."

"Remus, I can't possibly subject you to that again."

"Aurelia, please. I have faith in you." His grip loosened as the Sleeping Draught took effect.

She placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. "We'll talk more in the morning about how you feel. Once term starts, I'd like you to come back for a more in depth interview. That way we won't have Severus glowering at us."

He laughed weakly at her joke. "That's probably for the best. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Remus," she said softly before dousing the light and letting him get some much needed rest.

When Severus came downstairs for breakfast, he found Aurelia preparing a tray, presumably for Lupin. "Is Lupin still in the basement?"

"No, I took him upstairs early this morning," she replied, as she finished putting the tray together.

"Why didn't you wake me?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "I didn't wake you because there wasn't much point in both of us losing sleep."

"What if something had gone wrong? What if he didn't transform back?" he scolded.

Hearing his tone of voice, she felt a little guilty for not waking him. She had never considered that possibility. "I am not helpless. He was not dangerous in his partially transformed state, and it wasn't likely that he would become more dangerous as the night went on."

"But you didn't know that for a fact." He knew she was smarter than this and shouldn't have made such a serious mistake. A part of him wanted to lash out at her, but the other part of him realized that would only drive her away. Through sheer effort of will, he forced himself to say no more.

Having him act so protective towards her made her smile softly. "I'm sorry. I should have considered that. I get a little over confident at times."

"So I've noticed," he replied wryly.

She arched an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Look who's talking." After several seconds of silence, she added, "Would you mind if I invited him to stay for lunch at least? I want to make sure he's well enough to travel. He was quite weak this morning."

"I suppose not," he replied. He did mind, but he had better start learning to compromise. That was something his mother had told him was important, a fact she had reinforced last night.

She smiled warmly. "Thank you for understanding. If you wait just a few minutes, I'll join you for breakfast."

While she was gone, he prepared two plates and poured himself a cup of coffee. He was on his second cup by the time she returned.

"Sorry. That took a little longer than I had anticipated. He's recovering much more quickly than I had expected, which is a good sign. I would like to bounce some theories off of you while you're here. I think I'm on the right track as far as halting the transformation, but it's still going to need quite a bit of work. And I'd like to work some sort of painkiller into the potion, but I'm not sure what would be effective without neutralizing the anti-transformation properties. I'll have to speak with Jeannette Miller in the Transformation Ward and see what she has to say. I've already built off of some of her research."

"Do you have that research available so I can review it?"

"Not here. But I'll ask her for a copy. She hasn't published it yet, but she had me read through her paper to make sure that she had included everything. I don't see why she wouldn't let you see her research, too, since you are helping on this project."

"Is there any particular reason why she isn't working on this particular aspect of the research with you?"

"She's still busy with her other projects. I'd rather work with you, though. She is very particular and controlling with her research partners, and they invariably end up playing the role of research assistants. My relationship with her is best conducted at arm's length, asking for each other's opinions on particular issues as they arise."

Aurelia heard her girls coming down the stairs. They were having a meaningless argument about who should go first.

"Children, behave," Aurelia admonished. They immediately calmed down. "Glad to see you decided to join us for breakfast."

"Mum, I don't have to sleep with her again tonight, do I?" asked Julia.

"You stole all the covers," declared Helen.

"Enough. Professor Lupin will likely be leaving today, so you can have your room back tonight, Helen. Honestly, you would think that living in a dormitory would have taught you to get along better than this."

"There's a difference between sharing a room and your very own bed, Mum," said Julia as she filled her plate.

"In keeping with the Christmas spirit, why don't the two of you try getting along? Now, once you've finished eating, both of you may clean up the kitchen. We'll be in the library."

"Are we going to the pageant this year?" Helen asked.

Aurelia kissed the top of Helen's head. "Of course we are, dear."

Once they were in the library, Severus asked, "Pageant?"

"Sorry. They put on a little show in the village square every year. It's become a sort of tradition that we go. You can come along if you'd like, though I do warn you, it is a Muggle affair."

"I think that it will be more entertaining than spending the evening here by myself. I shall attend."

"Well, thank you," she replied wryly, giving him a playful smile.

He arched an eyebrow, unappreciative of the humor in her voice.

"First, let me make some notes about what happened during this transformation cycle, and then we can get into the theories about how I was able to stop it. Maybe we can get it to work more efficiently to prevent transformation completely."

They spent most of the day working on the Wolfsbane Potion. He was pleased at how she was behaving toward him. Their conversation the previous night seemed to have relaxed her. During the course of the day, she would touch his arm to get his attention.

After dinner, they walked to the center of the village, near the large tree, for the pageant. As they were waiting for it to begin, Severus pulled at his clothes. He had always found Muggle clothing uncomfortable.

"Stop fussing. You look fine," whispered Aurelia.

"I can't believe we are standing out here in the snow waiting to watch an amateur performance of some sort."

"I would hardly call the few snowflakes something to dampen the mood. I think they add to the ambience." She smiled at him and shook her head when he snorted derisively. "No one made you come."

Once the performance started, Severus found it was more enjoyable than he had anticipated. The pageant consisted of several short plays with Christmas carol interludes. As the evening wore on, he noticed she was shivering, and he discretely cast a warming charm on her.

She leaned closer and whispered, "Thank you."

He was pleasantly surprised to discover that she remained close to him. He wasn't sure exactly what to do. Showing affection in public was not something he felt comfortable with. Fortunately, the pageant ended before the situation became too awkward.

On the walk home, Julia and Helen skipped ahead singing Christmas carols, their earlier animosity towards each other entirely forgotten.

"I love it when they get along so well," Aurelia mused.

"They are good children. Very well behaved."

"For the most part," she added. She looped her arm in his and leaned her head against his shoulder.

He was momentarily taken aback by her affectionate gesture, but he quickly recovered and placed his hand over hers. This was turning out to be quite an enjoyable

evening despite being surrounded by Muggles.

Once they were home, she sent them up to bed before joining Severus in the library.

He was still fussing with his shirt, unhappy with the way it sat.

"You could change if you like," she offered while pouring them drinks.

"That's not necessary. Thank you," he said as he accepted the drink, looking forward to some quiet time together.

"So, what did you think of the pageant?"

He was pleased that she sat next to him without prompting. "It was enjoyable even if it was a little cold out." They talked about the pageant until the noise upstairs subsided, indicating the girls were in bed. "Would you like to exchange gifts now?"

"In a little while. I'd just like to sit here a few minutes." She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder.

In the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve, Aurelia began to feel more and more comfortable around Severus. Some nights, they would take an hour or so after the girls went to bed to talk about potions. Other nights, the discussions would be more personal. Sometimes they would just sit quietly, enjoying each other's company, or she would read for a while from the book that he had gotten her for Christmas. It was a rare Potions book that she had been trying to acquire for several years. Still, even with all the time they spent together, they both were reluctant to discuss their pasts, even though they knew it had to be done eventually in order for their relationship to grow.

Aurelia had been pleased that Severus had not pushed her about their relationship. He seemed content with stealing a few kisses each night, at least for now. She knew that would change, and probably very soon. Once the girls returned to school, one of her reasons for moving so slowly would be gone. She still had a few days to think about that and come to terms with her feelings. And tonight would be the perfect opportunity to find out how others felt about her relationship with Severus.

Once she had put her earrings in, she stood and performed a fancy twirl for Helen, who had been watching her dress.

"You look pretty, Mum."

"Thank you." Aurelia looked at herself in the mirror. It had been a long time since she had dressed up like this. She was wearing newly purchased midnight blue velvet dress robes, sapphire earrings and, of course, the necklace that Severus had given her.

"I bet you'll be the prettiest witch there," said Helen.

"I don't know if that will be true, but thank you." As she headed toward the stairs, Helen raced ahead of her, letting the others know that Aurelia was coming. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, everyone was waiting for her. She saw the momentary look of surprise on Severus' face before he regained his composure and smiled at her.

"You look lovely."

She couldn't suppress the blush. "Thank you." Turning back to the children, she said, "Now, girls, don't stay up too late."

Aurelia looped her arm in Severus'. "Ready when you are." They arrived in the Apparating area of the most extravagant wizarding hotel in London. A few people were milling around the lobby, but she thought that most would already be inside the ballroom. Severus tried to pull away from her, but she held tight. "I'm not going to let my handsome escort get away so easily."

Severus wasn't sure if he was disappointed or pleased that their arrival did not get a lot of attention. A part of him had thought that people would be whispering, amazed at his presence, at the fact he was with a woman.

"Severus, I'd like to introduce you to Marcus Stillwater, head of St. Mungo's."

Before Aurelia could even finish the introduction, Marcus had already thrust his hand at Severus. "Professor Snape. An honor to finally meet you."

Severus was taken aback by this attention. "Mr. Stillwater. A pleasure."

"Aurelia, we'll be making a presentation tonight, so the two of you will be up at the head table. Sorry I didn't tell you about this earlier, but it was only finalized today."

"A presentation?"

"An anonymous benefactor has donated a large sum of money to the Poisons Ward. I thought it fitting you accept it as the head of the ward."

"Of course. I'd be honored."

"Good. I'll see the two of you at the head table."

Severus had paled at the thought of being seated all evening in front of the entire room. He was not the type of person who liked to receive attention; he preferred hiding in the shadows.

"Is something wrong?" she asked quietly.

"No. I'll be fine. Why don't I go get us something to drink?"

"That would be wonderful. I'll be waiting here for you."

He thought it would take at least two or three drinks for him to feel comfortable at the head table. It was one thing to have so prominent a seat at school. The students tended to ignore him, and he had a habit of taking a seat at the end of the table, even now. This was an entirely different situation. He would be in front of the most important members of wizarding society.

"Snape? What are you doing here?" asked an accusatory voice.

A/N: Once again, this chapter would not be what it is today without Zen Lady and nota beating me mercilessly when I try to do things out of character. This has been the most difficult chapter for me to write so far as I think they each saw about seven drafts. I thank everyone for their patience. Expect Chapter 7 in about two weeks due to travel and the fact I need to finish up a full first draft of it. Parts of it have already been to beta and back.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 7

Snape knew that voice. He hated that voice. "I am getting a drink," he replied dryly.

"Why are you even at this ball?" demanded Potter.

Picking up his drinks, Severus turned to face Potter. "I am the Deputy Headmaster. That is a position deserving of some respect, whether you realize it or not. If you will excuse me, it would be rude for me to keep my date waiting." Once his back was turned, he couldn't keep the self-satisfied grin from spreading across his face. Potter had looked absolutely dumbfounded at the idea that he would be actually be here accompanied by a woman.

"What's with the smirk?" Aurelia asked as she took the glass of wine from him.

"I ran into an old acquaintance. How much more socializing is expected of us?"

She smiled at him. "Another ten or fifteen minutes before dinner. I expect dinner will take a little over an hour, and then there will be dancing until midnight."

When the puddings were brought out, Severus realized that this part of the evening was nearly over. At least dinner had taken longer than she had anticipated. That would mean less time for dancing. Thankfully, about the only person paying him much attention was Potter, but he had long ago grown accustomed to the young man staring at him. Everyone applauded politely when Aurelia accepted the donation to the Poisons Ward. Severus was looking around the room trying to determine who the one million Galleon donor was. He presumed that anyone in the wizarding world capable of donating such a large sum of money must be in attendance at the ball tonight, but no one seemed to be taking credit for their act of generosity. This struck him as very odd. He didn't like mysteries, especially those that involved people close to him.

Once the donation was accepted, the last plates were cleared away, and the musicians began setting up on stage.

When Aurelia returned to her seat, she leaned close and asked, "Sure you won't change your mind?"

"I believe that I have already informed you that I don't dance."

Once the dancing began and Aurelia found herself whisked away to the dance floor, Severus found a secluded corner where he could observe and hopefully not have to deal with Potter again. Whenever one of the waiters passed by with a tray, he would invariably refresh his drink. However, watching Aurelia laugh and smile as she made her way around the dance floor, he began to rethink his decision. She had stopped by a few times, but someone always whisked her away to dance. There were decidedly fewer witches than wizards at the Ball.

As midnight approached, he decided that perhaps he had been too hasty in his decision not to remain at her side. He would dance, but only with her.

"May I cut in?"

Aurelia's partner gave her a questioning look and she nodded. Once she was with Severus, she asked, "I thought you said didn't know how to dance?"

"I merely said that I don't dance, not that I didn't know how. For you, I will make an exception."

She couldn't control the blush on her cheeks. "Thank you."

They danced to three songs before the countdown to midnight began. During those songs, she gazed at him fondly. The last song had been quite slow, and she had danced very close to him. When the countdown reached zero, he looked into her eyes.

She whispered, "Happy New Year, Severus," and reached up to kiss him.

Returning her kiss, he wrapped her in his arms. He was pleased to feel her doing the same. When he broke the kiss, he replied, "And Happy New Year to you, too." He could see the look in her eyes, the affection they betrayed. "It's late, do you want to leave?"

"All right," she said breathlessly.

When they arrived at her house, they found Helen and Julia asleep in front of the Wireless. Aurelia was able to get Julia semi-conscious and led her upstairs. "Could you carry Helen?"

"Of course," he replied.

As soon as she closed the door to Julia's room, he pushed her against the wall and captured her mouth in a passionate kiss, eager to see if her look at the Ball meant what he thought it did.

Aurelia returned the kiss for a few moments before pulling away. "The girls," she protested.

"They are most definitely asleep." He laced his fingers in her hair and kissed her neck.

She moaned softly before pulling away again. "But what if they wake?"

He was decidedly frustrated. She had said they should get to know each other, and that's what they had been doing for the last week. He had shown patience, shown interest in her, been attentive and respectful. He sighed, forcing himself to remain calm. *Let her set the pace*, he admonished. "That is highly unlikely." He would do his best to convince her to see things his way.

"You've had quite a bit to drink tonight."

"What if I have?" he asked as he began nibbling at her neck again.

"Not this way. I think we should both be sober."

"I'm not that drunk," he replied. Feeling her resolve was faltering, he continued, "I know you feel the same way I do."

"I do. But not like this. Later. Please?"

She had been teasing him all week. She had flirted with him, touched him affectionately, given him all the signals that she was ready, and now she was pushing him away again. "Aurelia," he said insistently.

She tried to pull away. "I...I'm not ready yet," she replied nervously.

Realizing that further pressure might just drive her away, he forced control of his emotions. "All right. So this is goodnight?"

She smoothed his robes where he had wrinkled them. "I think it's best right now." After giving him one last kiss, she whispered, "Goodnight."

He waited until she had closed her door, then he did his best not to slam his own. Deciding that he was now not drunk enough, he decided to open the bottle of Scotch she had given him for Christmas; it was the only way he would get any sleep.

He had thought they had made progress, but she was still tentative, unwilling to take that last step. He could tell that she was unlikely to do so while her children were here. She was hiding behind them. Once they were gone, he hoped that would change, that it would free her from her inhibitions. Taking another gulp from his glass, he tried to calm down.

In his increasing state of inebriation, he found it more and more difficult to formulate his plan to convince her they were ready for the next step. Any momentary flash of clarity was soon lost in the alcoholic haze. *At least it will help me sleep*, he mused as he stared at the amber liquid in his glass.

After shutting her door, Aurelia closed her eyes and sighed. It would have been so easy to give in to him. They had both had a fair amount to drink, enough to dull inhibitions. She was glad that her girls had been home. If they hadn't been here, she wasn't sure that she would have resisted. *Am I ready for this?* She paced her bedroom, realizing she didn't know the answer to that question despite what she had told him. There was a part of her that wanted to just go next door, tell him how she felt.

Dancing together, she had felt more alive than she had in the last year. As she put her dress robes away, she realized why she wasn't sure if she was ready. The two of them may have become close friends since the day he had finally regained consciousness, may have discussed having a physical relationship, but there had never been any discussion of an emotional relationship. That was something that she needed to know. Mere physical attraction and lust were not enough.

But how to discuss that with him? He was a very complex man who did not willingly expose his emotions to others. She had to know that what he felt for her was something more than the lustful desires of a lonely man. What she felt for him was definitely more, but she didn't want to drive him away by declaring her feelings before he was ready. She wasn't in any hurry and could wait for him as long as it took.

As she lay in her room, she thought about how nice it would be to have someone to share her bed again. It was always comforting to feel the presence of another, feel his arms wrapped around her. She tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep. He had said that she felt the same way about him that he felt about her, and she couldn't deny that she was attracted to him. Many times over the last few days, she had imagined what sort of lover he would be. She had no doubt that he would be enthusiastic, and although she knew that their first time together would be awkward, still, she had the impression that he would be a very physical lover.

Thinking about it only made the situation worse. It had been a long time since she had last had sex. Was it really that important that he tell her explicitly that he loved her? For that matter, did he love her? She thought the answer was yes, even if he found it difficult to say out loud. That was a reasonable assumption on her part, wasn't it?

Deciding the answer was 'yes', she pulled on her dressing gown and slipped out of her room. Checking on the girls, she saw they were both soundly asleep. Pausing with her hand on the other doorknob, she realized this was her last chance to change her mind. Realizing he might be asleep, she slowly opened the door.

He was slumped at his desk, a half-empty glass of Scotch beside him. After checking to make sure he was still breathing, she retrieved her wand. Once she had him in an upright position, she removed his dress robes, freezing for a moment when she realized that he was wearing nothing beneath them. While she had seen him in the buff before, it had been while he was her patient. Forcing herself to look away, she placed him in bed.

Kissing him gently on the lips, she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Returning to her room, she tried to decide what to do next. She had gone to him, fully expecting to take their relationship to the next level. Would she still feel that way tomorrow? Was this for the best? Time would tell. She would rise early and talk to him.

The following morning, she knew that he would be quite hung over and prepared a nice breakfast to take up to him, complete with Hangover Relief Potion.

"Serving the professor breakfast in bed?" Julia asked wryly.

"We got in late last night, and the Ball was quite the celebration."

"He's hung over, isn't he?"

"Even if he is, you will not mention it. In a few years, I suspect you may find yourself acting foolishly on New Year's."

"Yes, Mum," Julia replied just a bit sullenly.

"Did the two of you make it until midnight?"

"I did, barely. Helen fell asleep around eleven."

"Since I'm feeling generous, your only chore today will be to clean up the breakfast mess. Tomorrow, you can pack up for school, and then we'll make one last trip to London if need be."

"Yes, Mother. I'll let Helen know."

Aurelia took the tray upstairs and was not surprised to find Severus' room still dark. After setting the tray on the desk, she lit the lamp and set it on low light. Sitting next to him on the bed, she leaned down and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Good morning, Severus."

He grunted, rolled over and pulled his pillow over his head.

"I brought you something for the hangover, but you are going to have to sit up to drink it."

"Go away," came his muffled reply from under the pillow.

She gently pulled the pillow up. "You know you will feel better, so just get it over with. After you've drunk the potion, I brought breakfast, and I thought we'd eat up here."

He crawled out from under his pillow and drank the potion. He then gratefully accepted the glass of water she offered him. "Did you put me to bed last night?"

"I did. I thought you would be more comfortable." She picked up the tray and was going to move it to the bed.

"I am not an invalid. I don't need to eat in bed," he said gruffly.

"As you wish." She smiled softly as she set the tray back on the desk and waited for him to rise from bed.

He started to stand up and realized he was not wearing any clothes. Quickly pulling the blanket back over himself, he replied, "Perhaps I will eat here."

"Oh come now. It's nothing I haven't seen before," she said playfully as she brought the tray over to the bed. After placing the tray down, she sat next to him and poured coffee. "I had a good time last night."

He saw that she had a very sincere smile. "As did I. Thank you for bringing breakfast up."

She laughed softly. "I thought it would be best if the girls were spared seeing a hung over Professor Snape."

For once, he didn't mind the laughter, for he knew that she was not laughing at him as so many others had done. In the low light of the lamp she looked almost angelic. He couldn't help but notice how romantic a gesture bringing him breakfast in bed was. Could she finally be willing to move forward? "Are the girls downstairs?" He tried to sound casual, but wasn't sure he succeeded.

She slowly lowered her cup back to the saucer. "They are. How is your headache?"

He tried not to look disappointed. A large part of him had hoped that she had sent them to a friend's house. Reaching out to brush her cheek, he replied, "Completely gone." He leaned forward when she did not move away and pressed his lips against hers. When she didn't resist, he pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. After a few seconds, he lowered her to the bed and began unfastening her robes.

She gently pushed him away. "Severus, the girls are downstairs."

He pushed past her and nibbled her neck, his morning arousal partially dictating his behavior. "Send them away. I want you."

"I want you, too, but not right now," she replied reluctantly.

"When? We've waited so long."

She pushed him away, again. "We have, but for good reason."

He tried to hide his frustration. "And what might that reason be?"

Sitting up, she turned away from him. "I think we've gotten to know each other quite well."

"We have, though I would like to get to know you even better." He reached out for her shoulder, trying to pull her closer.

Turning to face him, she looked into his eyes. "I would, too, but..."

He could feel his heart sink. There was nothing good that could come after that sort of 'but'. "But what?" he asked quietly.

She reached down and grasped his hand. "This is a very big step. One that we should be sure of."

This morning was not going in the direction he had hoped after the manner in which she had woken him. "Are you not sure?"

She shifted nervously, not meeting his eyes. "I want to be sure. There's something I need to know."

He was quickly tiring of this game, but asked gently, "What might that be?"

Before she could answer, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she replied quickly.

Julia stuck her head into the room. "Professor, an owl came for you with an urgent message." She crossed the room and handed him a letter.

Opening the letter, he first skimmed through it, but when he realized how serious it was, he went back and took his time. By the time he had gotten to the end, he knew that he had to leave immediately. "I apologize, but I must return to Hogwarts straight away." Rising from the bed, he picked up his wand and quickly packed his belongings.

"What is it?" she asked, clearly concerned.

"There has been an accident, and Madam Pomfrey requires my skills as Potions master." He did not want to tell her all the details. The less she knew, the better.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not at the moment. If the situation does not improve, I will notify you, but a great deal of discretion is required." He still could not believe they were protecting that oaf, Hagrid, but the half-giant was also a hero of the war and had finally been allowed to purchase a new wand. Adrian had already expressed having a soft spot for the former gamekeeper.

She stood before him. "Will you be back before term starts?"

"It's not likely. I will send you an owl when I know more."

"All right. I'll see you later." She paused a moment before embracing him.

He had the distinct impression that she either wanted to say more or expected him to say something. "Take care of yourself," he said and then leaned down to kiss her before departing.

Aurelia had tried not to let his abrupt departure bother her. She had known that talking to him about her feelings would be difficult, but she had not realized how difficult it would be. Of course, it was not likely he had ever had that sort of discussion with anyone before. A part of her wished that she had been more direct, but she had always been taught that telling a man you love him first, especially if you weren't sure he returned that love, was not a good thing to do.

Thankfully, she had been busy over the last few days making sure the girls had everything ready for the start of term. There had been a shopping trip to London to replenish their supplies and to buy Helen new robes as she was outgrowing her old ones. The last Saturday of break, she sent them to the Parkers.

Since she had not received a message from Severus, she was beginning to wonder if he had realized what she was trying to discuss with him, and if it had scared him

away. She thought about sending him an owl, but rationalized that would make her seem too pushy.

A knock at the door disturbed her from her thoughts. She wondered who would be coming to see her and felt her pulse race as she thought it might be Severus. Checking the peephole, she saw that it was Remus instead, and she opened the door. "Remus, what a surprise to see you here."

He returned her hug. "Well, with Severus at school, I thought this would be a good time to go over the Wolfsbane potion with you. We all know it will get busy once term starts."

"Of course." She led him to the library. "How's his research coming? He wouldn't really tell me anything about the case."

He answered evasively, "As well as can be expected. He's monitoring...the patient rather closely. Last I heard, it should be a full recovery."

"That's good." She sat at the desk and retrieved her research notes. After shuffling a few papers around, she pulled out a piece of parchment. "I think it will be easier for you just to write your answers. I'll go put the kettle on, and we can review them together."

As she collected the tea service, she assumed that Severus had been too busy to send her an owl. Since his birthday was Thursday, she decided she would contact him instead on Wednesday if she hadn't heard from him by then.

By the time the tea was ready and she returned to the library, Remus had finished answering her questions. They spent the next hour and a half reviewing them. "Hmm," she said as she considered the new data.

"Do you have any ideas?" Remus asked hopefully.

"A few. I need to do some research to decide which might be the most useful. The only problem is that if I choose the wrong track, your next transformation may be even more painful than the last."

He reached out and gripped her hand. "The pain will be worth it if it leads to a way to halt the transformation completely. I knew what I was getting into when I volunteered to be your test subject. I'll manage; I always do," he reassured her.

She tried to imagine how difficult it must be for him, and she was amazed that he could remain so good-natured through everything he had experienced in his life. "I just hate the prospect of causing you any more pain. I'm supposed to heal people, not make them suffer."

"And you will. I know the original potion took quite some time to perfect, and I imagine there were some rather unpleasant moments during initial testing."

She smiled weakly. "You're right; there were. Would you like more tea?" She realized the pot had long ago gone cold.

"Allow me." He picked up the tray and headed toward the kitchen. When he returned he poured for both of them.

They chatted pleasantly about their respective jobs. Remus regaled her with some amusing anecdotes about his students, including a few about Helen and Julia. She was surprised to learn that Helen had developed a bit of a smart mouth. He sheepishly admitted that he thought one of his coworkers, Kalliope Morris, was attracted to him.

"What's she like? The girls haven't told me too much about her," Aurelia asked, pleased that Remus might finally have found someone.

"She's quite pretty, so what she sees in me is anyone's guess." Aurelia gave him a disapproving look and he smiled slightly. "She's very talkative, but I think she's running out of things to say. It's not really as bad as it sounds. We had dinner together the other night, and it was quite pleasant. She can be a good listener, and I think she is starting to let me see who she really is. It's quite different from the persona she shows as a teacher. We'll see how it goes from here."

"I'm glad you've found someone else."

He laughed softly. "I'm not sure if I have, but we're going to move slowly since we do work together. I wouldn't want the situation to become awkward for either of us." Pausing, he took a sip of his tea before asking, "How are things with you and Severus?" he asked after several seconds of silence.

"Why do you ask?" she asked casually, not wanting to give away too much.

"Well... He's been a bit more cranky than usual. I was wondering if something happened between the two of you to sour the relationship."

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. "I wouldn't say anything happened to exactly sour it, but I'm not sure if it's moving forward anymore."

"Oh?"

"I know this isn't anything he's used to..." She realized that she was talking to a man about a romantic relationship with another man and was momentarily embarrassed. "Are all men so reluctant to share their emotions?"

"I can only speak for those I knew, but neither Sirius nor James was likely to tell a girl he loved her, if that's what you mean."

"That is what I mean. It's very important to me. I feel that I could make a life with Severus, but I'm not sure if he feels that way about me. I was trying to talk to him about it, but I fear I was being too circumspect, and then he was summoned back to Hogwarts."

"Well, if his behavior is any indication, I would say that he is quite smitten with you."

"Smitten and in love are two different things."

"You could just ask him."

"I know. That's what I should have done. So he really seems smitten with me?"

"Probably not the best word to use. He's definitely frustrated by something, and it's logical to assume that it's you."

"Then why hasn't he sent me an owl?" She was finding it difficult to hide her frustration. If Severus truly cared about her, he should have sent her even a short note.

"He's been very busy with his patient. He and Poppy have been working virtually around the clock."

"It's nothing contagious, is it?" She was concerned about her girls returning to Hogwarts if there was something dangerous there.

He chuckled. "No. It was an injury, not disease. The students are not in any danger."

"I should probably get going. I have a few preparations to make before the students return. Thank you for tea, and let me know if I can provide anything else."

"Thank you, Remus. I'll see you before full moon."

Once she was alone, she resolved that she would tell Severus how she felt when she met him for dinner for his birthday, assuming he could get the time away from the castle. It wouldn't do to wait, and talking with Remus had reassured her that Severus did feel something for her; he just might not recognize it as love.

Severus scowled as he pored through yet more books in the library. After two days of searching, they had finally been able to capture the beast that had attacked Charlie Weasley. He was nearing the end of his second day of trying to determine what that *thing* was. Surely, this should convince the Headmaster that they should not protect Hagrid. No one knew where the former gamekeeper had gone. It seemed he and his *brother* had decided to go on some sort of holiday. At least Charlie was finally stable.

He shoved the book away, irritated by his latest failure, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The headache that had been threatening for the better part of the day was about to manifest itself in full. He had too many thoughts occupying his mind. On top of trying to cure Charlie's poisoning, he found his mind kept returning to the conversation he and Aurelia had before he left. He still had no idea what she had been trying to discuss, and his mind kept trying to unravel that mystery. Someone sat across from him at the table, and he was about to lash out at the intruder when he realized that it was his mother. "What do you want?" he asked in an irritated voice.

"I thought you might like some tea, or perhaps something stronger. It's nearly closing and you've run all the students out."

He picked up another book. "Your concern is overwhelming, but that won't be necessary."

She reached over and shut the book. "Yes, it will. Something is bothering you. I can tell you aren't giving your full attention to Charlie." Standing up, she glared at him until he did likewise, and she led him into her office. "Now, will it be tea or something stronger?"

He flopped into the chair. "Something stronger."

She handed him a glass and pulled the second chair closer to his. "What's bothering you? Does it have something to do with Aurelia?"

Swirling the liquid in the glass, he took a few seconds to compose his thoughts. "Of course it does. Women are so damned confusing." He sounded less angry and more exasperated. "Right before I was summoned here, she was trying to have some sort of conversation with me, only I have no idea what the subject was. Why can't women ever come out and ask a straight question?"

Eileen looked intrigued. "What was she saying?"

He took a long drink of the amber liquid, not sure how to discuss this with his mother. "I was attempting...to have an intimate moment with her, when she pulled away and started talking about how well we knew each other, but that there were still things we needed to discuss. Things she seemed to feel were very important." He saw the broad grin spread across his mother's face and replied with a deep scowl. "What is *that* look for?"

She reached over and grabbed his hands, tears glistening in her eyes. "Oh, Severus!"

Now, he was convinced that all women were truly mad. Perhaps they were a different species. "What? Do you know what she was talking about?" He couldn't take much more of this, and if she didn't provide him with him with a straight answer, he would use Legilimency.

The tears spilled down Eileen's cheek, and she pulled Severus into an embrace. "Of course I do. She was trying to find out if you love her."

He stiffened. "If I love her?"

Releasing him from her arms, she asked, "Do you?"

He opened his mouth to answer and promptly closed it, unsure of his answer. "What difference does it make?" he snarled.

Eileen sighed. "A great deal. Love is a very important emotion. She wants to make sure that what you feel for each other is not simply lust."

"She should know the answer to that by now." Severus Snape was not the sort of man who freely discussed his emotions.

"Well, if you want your relationship to progress, you are actually going to have to tell her, confirm her theory."

Draining his glass, he stood to leave. "Women are highly illogical."

Smiling smugly, she replied, "Yes, we are. Tell her what you feel. She loves you and accepts you for who you are. Don't be afraid of her."

"Who are you to be giving me advice about love? I don't recall it playing a part in your marriage. And who says that is what I'm looking for?"

She tried to hide the hurt caused by his verbal barb. "The absence of a thing can make a person appreciate it that much more. Besides, have I not always loved you?"

He found he couldn't deny this. During his childhood, his mother had tried to protect him, shield him from his father's rages. After all, love was the reason he had hidden her from the Dark Lord.

"Severus, you are not your father's son, you are my son. Perhaps I could have done better, tried harder to protect you, but I did the best I could. As much as you may not agree, I needed your father."

Hearing the sorrow in his mother's voice, he felt slightly guilty about how had been treating her. He wanted to say something, but had no idea what it should be.

"You are your own man. Your life was shaped by your experiences. There is no reason you have to be your father. Don't be afraid of this," she said gently.

"I am afraid of nothing." He left, stopping only to retrieve the latest book he had been trying to read before heading down to his dungeons.

A while later, still failing to concentrate on that book, he decided that he might as well at least get some sleep. Unfortunately, that too eluded him. His mind kept returning to the conversation with his mother. Was it that important that she hear him utter words he had only told his mother as a young boy? His years as a Death Eater had taught him to suppress emotions, that they could be used against you. Most especially love. How many of his brethren had been coerced because of their love for another. But the Dark Lord was gone. There was no one to threaten her.

Term started without him having found the time to see Aurelia. On his list of things to do was to send her a message, but he wanted to be able to tell her when he would see her again. None of what he wanted to say to her could be put in a letter.

On Wednesday morning, an owl swooped down and landed directly in front of him. Recognizing her handwriting on the envelope, he resisted the urge to tear into it. It wouldn't do to draw attention. Unfolding the letter slowly and carefully, he was surprised by what he read.

Dearest Severus,

I hope all is well and that the case has not proven too difficult. If you need any help, I can be quite discreet in making a visit to Hogwarts. I know that you didn't want St. Mungo's involved, so I am prepared to take a sick day.

Whether or not you accept my help, I would like to invite you to dinner tomorrow. I've arranged a private dining room with Madam Rosmerta. I know you are a private man and would not like anyone to know it's your birthday. Even if it's only for an hour, though I would prefer for longer, I would like to see you again. We parted on such rushed

terms, and so much was left unsaid. I apologize for my cryptic conversation. I fear it may have left you unnecessarily worried.

Affectionately yours,

Aurelia

He was momentarily surprised that she knew when his birthday was, but he reasoned that she did have access to his medical records. Deciding he would join her for dinner, he penned a quick response and sent the owl on its way. Even though Charlie was not yet fully recovered, it felt as though a great weight had been lifted.

The following night, he arrived at the Three Broomsticks, and Rosmerta grinned broadly while ushering him to the private dining room. He was surprised to see he was the first to arrive, but not surprised to see a small table set for two and dim, romantic lighting. There was a music box playing what he assumed was romantic music in the corner and a small settee in front of the raging fire.

"I'll have dinner sent up shortly after Aurelia arrives." Rosmerta gave him one last grin before departing the room.

Glancing around the room, Severus was reminded of a cover from one of the romance novels he kept confiscating from the older girls. Helping himself to a drink, he took a seat on the settee.

After half an hour, he began to worry. Aurelia had been late before, but it had only been a few minutes. And she knew that his time was precious.

Another half an hour later, he was truly concerned. If Aurelia had sent an owl, Rosmerta would certainly have let him know. Deciding to investigate, he headed downstairs. No, Rosmerta had not received a message. He left without saying anything else and Apparated directly to her house. It was deserted and did not look like anyone had been there all day. The hair on the back of his neck was now standing up. However, the wards had not been disturbed, and there was no sign of struggle.

Perhaps she was delayed at work he thought. Apparating to St. Mungo's, he hurried to her ward on the third floor. Composing himself before walking through the door, he took a series of deep breaths. He saw Johnson sitting at the desk at the far end of the ward. "Miss Johnson, have you seen Healer MacLean?"

"Not since yesterday, Professor. She took the day off."

Fighting down the sense of panic, he asked, "Is she ill?"

"She didn't say. Why?"

"No reason." Without another word, he swept out of the ward. It was odd that she would invite him to dinner, take the day off from work and then not show up. Deciding that he had perhaps missed something at her house, he decided to return and investigate further. After that, he would return to Hogwarts and see if she sent him a letter explaining her absence.

A/N: Once again, this chapter would not be what it is without the amazing help of Zen Lady and nota, who are always more than happy to let me know I'm not making sense again. They also let me know when I don't give enough detail, or, on rare occasion, give too much.

I know you will all be asking me why Aurelia didn't show up for dinner, and I ask you to be patient. I am working on the next chapter. I will give a warning that it may take a while. I'm trying not to make it too busy. It may end up being a shorter one to make up for the fact this is a longer one.

As always, all reviews are greatly appreciated.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 8

Severus returned to the castle and immediately checked both his office and his quarters for a message in case he had missed an owl. There was nothing. Aurelia had not come to dinner, nor had she notified him that she would be unable to meet him at Rosmerta's. He would never have admitted it, but for the first time that he could remember, he had been looking forward to celebrating his birthday. If she had been busy at the hospital, he could have understood that, although he would still have been secretly disappointed. However, she hadn't been there either.

As he paced his room, he kept going over the letter that he had sent to her. He supposed it was possible his reply to her request had not been sufficient. His discussion with his mother had convinced him that Aurelia wanted to know how he felt about her, whether he loved her. His reply had been rather short, and in hindsight, perhaps a bit terse. Would that have been enough to drive her away? He had thought she would have preferred hearing what he had to say face to face, not just reading it on a piece of parchment.

Deciding this was a riddle he would not solve on his own, he headed up to the library. Stepping up to the desk, he demanded, "I need to talk with you".

"The library closes in an hour. Would you like me to meet you in your quarters?"

"I need to talk, now," he hissed through clenched teeth.

"The library isn't closed, yet," she replied unperturbed by his brusque behavior.

Turning to face the library's patrons, he announced tersely, "The library is now closed. All students are to depart." When they didn't move fast enough, he shouted, "NOW!" Within seconds the library was emptied.

Eileen raised an eyebrow and gave him a disgusted look. "Was that really necessary?"

"Aurelia did not show up to dinner tonight."

"Oh? Was she busy at work?"

"No," he replied sharply. "Nor was she at home, nor did she send me a message informing me that she wouldn't be there. Obviously, she stood me up."

"Why would she do that? She's the one who invited you to dinner?"

"That's why I am here. You are a woman, not to mention the fact that I have been taking your advice regarding this matter so far. Is it possible that my less than enthusiastic reply would have given her the impression that I do not love her?"

"No, not at all," she reassured. "Come, let's have some tea."

"I'd prefer something stronger."

"Well, you're getting tea tonight. At least until we finish talking."

"How can you be sure that my brief response to her dinner invitation did not drive her off?"

She placed her hand on his arm, and found herself unable to hide the pain from her expression. "She's known you for more than half a year. In that time, she's sure to have realized that you aren't the outwardly emotional type. And let's not forget that she must love you, or she wouldn't have gone to such lengths to discover how you truly feel about her. You said she has a friend; did you check there?"

It hadn't occurred to him at the time. "No."

"Well, that would be a start. Perhaps her friend had an emergency? Any number of things could have come up that could have prevented her from contacting you. Send her an owl and see what she has to say, but be polite. Don't demand to know where she was."

Arching an eyebrow, he retorted, "I would never do that."

Eileen chuckled softly. "I beg to differ, but it doesn't matter. Until you know what happened, just don't jump to conclusions. It's not like you haven't ever had emergencies yourself."

He scowled, realizing that she was right. He would send her an owl and ask politely where she had been. Deciding that he didn't have anything else to discuss, he rose.

"You're welcome," Eileen called sarcastically to his retreating back.

He froze and turned his head over his shoulder. "Thank you."

As he left the library, he began composing the new letter in his head. He was so lost in thought that he walked straight into Adrian. "Headmaster, forgive me."

"Well, Severus. How unexpected to run into you. Did you enjoy your dinner?"

This simple question reminded him that he had not eaten yet. He was also faced with determining how to answer this awkward question. "It was fine."

"I must admit, I expected you to be gone longer. Though I suppose she must have a considerable amount of St. Mungo's business to attend to these days, what with that large donation and all." Adrian gave Severus a sly grin and a wink.

Refraining from rolling his eyes, Severus replied, "If you will excuse me, Adrian, I also am quite busy."

"Of course, of course. You must have quite important things on your mind too these days. I'll let you get on with your business."

Severus hardly even heard the old man's reply as he walked away. Within an hour, he had posted a letter to Aurelia and sent it with the most trustworthy owl at the school.

Aurelia sat in a well-appointed room. There was an elegant four-poster bed, a sitting area in front of the fireplace, and a large bathroom. She still wasn't sure exactly what had happened to her. She had left work and was stopping at the market to pick up food for breakfast. The next thing she knew, she was in this room. The room was windowless so she had no idea where she might be or what time of day it was but the lamps provided more than enough light. The door was locked and her wand was gone, so there was little she could do to escape.

She wondered how long it would take anyone to notice she was missing? What would they do when she didn't show up at work? She tried not to think about the fact that if she wasn't in Britain, it was unlikely the Ministry would ever find her. Would Severus come looking for her? She desperately hoped so.

After determining there was no escape from her comfortable prison, she sat on the bed, waiting for someone to come for her.

Four hours after she regained consciousness, the door opened, and a rather imposing wizard gestured for her to follow him. Knowing she had no choice, she followed. While she was completely terrified, she hoped that she would be able to control her emotions to a certain extent. She knew that predators fed off the fear of their prey.

It was only a short walk before the wizard left her in another room. She noticed this one had a table set for two in addition to the normal furnishings of a living room. Restlessly, she paced the room, hoping it wouldn't be long before her captor to reveal himself.

She spun around as she heard the door open behind her.

Lucius Malfoy had a huge grin on his face. "I apologize for keeping you waiting. I hope that you have been comfortable."

He had been the last person she had expected to see. She had thought that if he hadn't done anything caused her any trouble by now, he wouldn't. "What do you want with me?"

"You kidnapped me!" she shouted defensively.

Crossing to the table, he casually opened the wine bottle and poured two glasses. "Now that is rather harsh and impolite. I had thought that your manners were better than that."

She refused to accept the glass that he held out to her. Moderating her tone, she retorted, "Kidnapping someone is quite a bit less mannerly than that! Why am I here?"

Evading her question, he said, "I find discussion on an empty stomach rather tedious. Won't you join me at my dinner table?"

Sitting on the sofa, she turned her back on him in answer.

"Well, then, you will forgive me if I eat alone."

At first, it was easy to ignore him, but the smell of the food wafted over to her, reminding her that she had not eaten since lunch, and it must be close to midnight. She didn't

want to give him the satisfaction of giving in to him, but it was hard for her to ignore her rumbling stomach.

"I assure you that the food is in no way poisoned. And it is quite exquisite. The roast pork is especially succulent."

That made it harder still for her to ignore her hunger. Roast pork was her favorite dish. And she rationalized that she had no idea when she might be fed again. After all, she had no intention of cooperating with him. Sitting down across from him, she snapped her napkin before placing it in her lap and delicately eating her food. The pork was quite good, but she would never admit that to him.

"So good of you to come to your senses and join me. I think you could find your stay here quite pleasant."

She tried not to choke on her food. "I doubt it."

"My dear, there is no reason for you to be so rude. Is your room not comfortable?"

"Terrifically comfortable for a prison cell. You know, they'll realize I'm gone and come looking for me."

He chuckled softly. "Not for several days. You see, you sent them a letter, informing them that you would be taking some time off."

"They'll know it's not from me."

"Unlikely. The handwriting is a perfect match, and everyone knows that you deserve some time off."

"Severus will rescue me," she replied curtly. When she didn't show up for dinner, he would get worried, and dig deeper into the mystery of her absence than any of her coworkers would.

"That is a pleasant illusion for you to hold on to, but I fear that it will not be a reality. You see, we are not in France." After a few seconds of careful consideration, he added, "You could do so much better than someone like him." He reached across the small table to pet her cheek, and she jerked away from him.

She did her best to ignore him, and they finished the meal in silence.

Once finished with the meal, he refilled his glass and again offered her a glass of wine. "Are you sure you won't have any?" When she glared at him, he continued, "As you wish. I suppose you are curious about why I've had you brought here."

"Yes, I would like to know why you've kidnapped me."

Rising from the table, he moved to one of the chairs. "I did not kidnap you. I wished to meet with you, and I knew that you would refuse any direct offer, so I decided not to waste my time." When she didn't reply, he continued, "I know that you were working on something to help Severus this past summer. Something to help him with how he was feeling after the war."

"Get to the bloody point!" she shouted.

He chided gently, "Temper, temper, my dear. I only want you to help me, too."

"That will never happen. The world will be better off without you."

"You believe that, do you? Without me, your hospital would not have an endowment for a new Poisons Ward."

"That's your money?" she asked in complete surprise.

He gave her a sly grin and replied, "Who else would have that sort of money? The wizarding world needs me, and I, in turn, need you."

Defiantly, she replied, "My services can't just be bought by any criminal who thinks he has sufficient funds to do so."

His smile faded somewhat, but did not completely disappear. "I wish I could discuss this with you, but I'm sure that you understand the restrictions placed upon me. I ask that you trust that the wizarding world does indeed need me."

"Never," she insisted.

The smile was completely gone now. "As you wish. I will give you time to change your mind. I will try to make your stay here as comfortable as possible, but my patience is not infinite." With that, he swept out of the room.

Almost immediately, the gruff wizard was standing at the doorway, waiting for her to join him. She sighed and lowered her eyes as she let him lead her back to her room. Severus would find her, no matter what Lucius had said. He just had to find her.

By Saturday, Severus still hadn't heard from Aurelia - and neither had anyone else - and he was now quite concerned. Unable to remain at Hogwarts doing nothing, he decided to see if she had returned home. A check of her house showed that she had still not been there. At St. Mungo's, Johnson produced a letter saying that Aurelia was meeting with the anonymous donor, and that she would be away for a few days. Severus found it odd that she would not have informed him, but then again, he knew wealthy old wizards could be a bit eccentric. Perhaps she had sent him a message but it had just gone astray. Yes, that made perfect sense.

He contemplated asking Julia if she had heard from her mother - surely if she were planning on staying out of the country for more than a day or so, she would have notified her children. But then, he didn't want to unnecessarily worry the girls if Aurelia had not notified them one way or another. In that case, he had no doubt that Julia would be unable to keep his inquiry secret from her sister for very long.

As he was returning to the castle, he had a sudden, sickening thought: what if Malfoy had something to do with her disappearance? After all, there was the rather large anonymous donation, one that few in Britain could afford to make. Deciding he had to determine if this was the case, he walked back toward the gates and Disapparated to France.

Walking up the drive to the chateau, he realized that it looked as deserted as it had last summer. This high in the Alps, the weather was much colder than it had been at Hogwarts, and he wished he had thought to bring a heavier cloak. Closing in on the chateau, he did not feel the familiar chill he would have expected when crossing through a protective ward.

It was possible that Malfoy had left shortly after the visit he and Aurelia had paid him last summer. After all, what reason did Malfoy have to trust Severus? Quick exploration of the chateau showed that it had been deserted for some time. This made it more likely that Malfoy had left last summer, but Severus still could not shake the feeling that Malfoy had something to do with Aurelia's absence. Unfortunately, he had no idea where to begin looking for them.

Deciding that the school could survive without its deputy headmaster until Monday morning, he resolved to begin a search. He knew that Malfoy would have needed help getting Aurelia out of Britain, since his very entry into the country would bring a horde of Aurors descending upon him. Therefore, he decided to start his search at some of the more unsavory wizarding establishments on the Continent. It would take time, but he hoped to discover at least some hint of Malfoy's location.

Aurelia lay on the bed, curled up with her pillow. Her captors had ignored her once she had refused her help. She had been given nothing to eat or drink and was thankful her room had a lavatory, or she would be suffering from dehydration. The ever-present rumble of her stomach was hard to ignore. Even though she was utterly exhausted, it would not let her sleep.

After two days without food, she was seriously contemplating giving in to Malfoy's request, but she knew that Severus had to be looking for her. He would find her and capture Malfoy. He just had to. She found she could no longer hold back the tears. Never before had she been in such a seemingly hopeless situation. And if something happened to her, what would become of her two girls?

When the door opened, she sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Malfoy crossed the room, pulled out a handkerchief, and sat beside her to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "Now, now, my dear. There is nothing to cry about," he said in a soothing voice. "You can be quite comfortable here; you need only cooperate." He rubbed her arm gently, in a reassuring manner.

She tried to pull away from him, but his grip on her arm was too tight. "That won't happen."

"So you keep saying. You are quite stubborn, but I believe you will come to see reason in time. I know that you probably isolate yourself in your medical world, so I thought I would enlighten you on how the business world functions. The Ministry would have you believe that everything is returning to normal, but it is not. Factories remain shuttered and unemployment remains high. And do you know why? Because there is no one with both the appropriate business acumen and capital to invest properly in the rebuilding of our world. I'm sure you've never realized it, but my industries employed ten percent of wizarding Britain's workforce. Many of those businesses remain closed even now. The Ministry cannot find buyers, and it cannot run those businesses due to a lack of capital. Without me, they will rely more and more on costly imported goods. The Ministry will be forced to lower tariffs. It will then become impossible for Britons to start their own companies. Even Gringotts has lost faith in British industry and is not granting loans as it once did. Do *you* want to be responsible for the downfall of our wizarding society? A society that your husband died protecting?"

For a few moments, she began to fall under the spell of his words before realizing what he was doing. She started crying again. "You monster! How dare you manipulate me?" She struggled to get away from him and beat at his chest, but it had no effect. He merely pulled her into a smothering embrace so she could no longer hit him.

"I am not manipulating you. I'm telling you the truth." He released her and with a snap of his fingers, he summoned a house-elf who was carrying a stack of newspapers. "You can read all about it in the *Daily Prophet*. Foreign newspapers are starting to report the same thing. There is more to the world than your potions, Aurelia. Open your eyes to it. I would think that as a Slytherin, you would appreciate that the world is not black and white." He left without saying another word.

For the next hour, Aurelia was able to resist looking at the papers. Finally, boredom and curiosity got the better of her, and she started flipping through them. Of course, the articles supported what Malfoy had told her, but she thought they could have easily been altered to report what he wanted her to believe. The articles in the rest of the papers looked genuine, but that didn't mean that these particular ones hadn't been forged. Figuring this was another way he was trying to manipulate her, she threw the papers aside and curled back up on the bed, wondering how much longer he would deny her food. He needed her alive, so he had to feed her eventually, didn't he?

Severus stepped into yet another dark and dingy tavern. Those that operated on the fringe of society preferred the darkness for the anonymity it afforded. It was late, and he could tell that the establishment was getting ready to close. Sidling up to the bar, he placed a sickle before him.

"Monsieur?"

"Do you speak English?"

"Oui. What may I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a friend. Another Englishman. He went into hiding last summer and has long blonde hair. He tends to think he is better than everyone else."

The bartender considered this description for several seconds. "No. No Englishman like that. We see few of you here."

Severus could tell that the man was not lying, and let him take the sickle. Exhausted from searching much of Western Europe, a weary Severus was forced to return to Hogwarts; he had class in a few hours. A dose of Invigoration Draught would help him get through the day. He would find Adrian before class and let the headmaster know that he needed to take a brief leave of absence. Today, he would rest after class, and tomorrow morning, he could continue on with his search. Eastern Europe should not be as difficult to search as the wizarding towns were closer together.

Entering the castle, he began making his way toward the dungeons, when a voice from the stairs above him stopped him.

"Severus! We need to talk," said Adrian before turning back towards the headmaster's study.

He had at least hoped to be able to take his potion and shower before having to meet with the headmaster. Obviously, his absence had not gone as unnoticed as he had wished.

Aurelia opened her eyes when she heard the door open. Malfoy was back, levitating a small tray before him. She sat up and began salivating, hoping that he would let her have the food.

Crossing the room, he set the tray on the bed, out of her reach, and sat next to her. "I see that you have read through the papers. Have you given thought to my plight?"

She kept eyeing the tray, wondering what was under the cover. "How do I know that's the truth? You could have easily forged the articles."

He slowly uncovered the tray, revealing an array of bite-sized foods. "For what purpose? I want to return home. I want to tell the truth."

Licking her lips in anticipation of finally getting to eat something, she asked, "What truth?" She started reaching for the tray.

Malfoy gently captured her hand. "You know that I cannot tell the truth now. Once you help me as you helped Severus, then I can. Is that so much to ask?" He kissed her fingers and she pulled her hand away. Reaching over to the tray, he picked up a strawberry and waved it in front of her mouth. "You want this, don't you?"

She could think of nothing other than the berry in Malfoy's fingers and chased after it. He finally let her have it. As she slowly chewed it, she savored the taste and feel of her first food in days. She tried to reach the tray, but he restrained her. "Please?"

"If you want more, you have to give me something in return."

A/N: Thank you for your patience in waiting for this chapter. My muses are having a bout of ADD and keep throwing me new ideas. Thankfully, a number of these are one-shot fics, but they still take away from my time writing this story. If anyone knows how to wrangle plot bunnies and keep them from distracting my muses, please, let me know. LOL I normally like to have two stories going at any one time, but I have about four and as many one-shots that I'm working on.

Also, thank you so very much to those of you that have left reviews. They really mean the world to me. It's nice to hear that others are reading and enjoying the story. Concrit is always welcome.

A final thanks to nota and Zen Lady for their help in polishing up this chapter for posting. They always bring up such profound questions that keep me in line.

As for Chapter 9, I am discussing a few plot points with my betas. I have about 3 pages written out of somewhere in the vicinity of 10. I'm going to take a wild guess and estimate about two weeks before I'm ready with the next chapter, but please, don't hold me to that. If you are interested in updates, check out my livejournal - <http://ltgarrix.livejournal.com> - where I will try to post periodic updates on my writing status.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 9

Aurelia couldn't take her eyes off of the tray of food. A part of her mind knew it was there to distract her, that he was only playing games with her, but that part of her mind was not in control at the moment. "I can't give you that. Please, let me have something to eat," she pleaded.

He picked up a piece of cheese, which she desperately wanted. "You do realize that nothing in this world is free. We each have something that the other wants. I can compensate you quite nicely for your work."

Reaching up and grabbing his hand, she pulled it closer so she could eat the cheese. "I don't need your money."

Leaning closer to feed her another strawberry, he whispered, "Not all rewards are monetary." He caressed her arm. "The Malfoy name will once again be returned to prominence. Aligning oneself with a powerful wizard has often been found to be...very rewarding."

She wasn't sure what he was getting at, but she was at least able to enjoy a few precious bites of food.

He watched her, continuing to caress her, testing her reaction. After she finished chewing, he brushed the edge of her jaw. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?" He held the tray out for her to select something else.

She picked up another strawberry, cautiously watching him. He let her eat a few more bites of food before he set the tray behind him on the bed, the various delicacies still in plain sight. The rumble in her stomach prevented her from concentrating on anything other than the food sitting just out of reach. She didn't notice that his hand was on her thigh.

He licked his lips in anticipation and slid a little closer to her. "Would you like more?"

Assuming he was discussing food, she replied, "Yes, please."

He leaned forward and captured her mouth in a demanding kiss.

Aurelia immediately tried to jerk back, but he had wrapped his arms around her. When she finally broke free from the kiss, she shouted, "No!"

"You would do well to rethink that sentiment. I do not tolerate disobedience."

"I'm not your servant." Fear suddenly threatened to overwhelm her. She knew that he was stronger than she was, that he could easily overpower her.

He pushed her against the bed, pinning her arms so that she could not strike him. "You said that you wanted more. I am only giving you what you asked for."

She had wanted more, but this certainly wasn't what she had meant. "Not this," she sobbed.

Malfoy shifted his grip so that he captured both of her hands in one of his. He slid his free hand under her skirt and caressed her thigh. She tried to fight against him, but one of his knees was wedged between hers. The tears came unbidden.

Abruptly, he removed his hand and gave her a look of disdain. Grabbing her jaw with his hand, he said, "I will not tolerate this sort of behavior. It is childish and unattractive. You will obey me if you wish to eat." He kissed her hungrily, shifting his hand to squeeze her breast before releasing her. He then waved away the tray, and rose to his feet. "Should you change your mind, you have only to call my name."

After he left, she curled up and sobbed uncontrollably. Those few pieces of food had not been enough to sate her hunger; instead, they had only made it worse. After the tears finally stopped, she began to wonder if it would really be so bad to help him. Regardless of what she might do for him here and now, he would still have no way of entering Britain without quickly being captured.

Forcing herself to think clearly, she knew that she could never help him. He was a Death Eater, and it would be a crime for her to aid him. Besides, no matter what happened, he needed her alive. She wondered why he hadn't used the Imperius Curse on her. That would be the easiest way for him to get what he wanted.

Severus decided that his best course of action would be not to speak first, but to let Adrian drive the conversation. They sat in a less than comfortable silence for what must have been a minute or two, although it felt like an eternity to him.

"You know that I have no problem granting personal time on weekends. You need only ask. While Charlie has been so ill, I know that you have been doing your best for him, working nearly round the clock. You richly deserve, and probably need, a break. And as he is finally stable, I would have no problem granting you some time off."

The blood drained from Severus's face as he remembered that he was still supposed to be aiding in the research to neutralize the venom of the beast that had bitten Charlie.

Adrian beamed. "Fortunately, Poppy and Pomona had a breakthrough of sorts. They were finally able to isolate and, they believe, neutralize the venom, and Charlie seems

to be recovering quite nicely now. He should be back to normal, or as close to normal as a Weasley ever gets, anyway, in another week or so." Adrian paused a few moments before continuing. "Is there a reason why you decided to take the weekend off without telling me?" His eyes twinkled with amusement.

Severus realized it would be incredibly easy to let Adrian believe that he had spent the weekend with Aurelia. Unfortunately, it would do nothing to aid his search. "Aurelia did not come to dinner on Thursday. Neither was she at home, nor did she send me an owl letting me know that she wouldn't be able to make our...appointment. I became concerned. She has not been home since Wednesday morning. Supposedly, she sent a letter to St. Mungo's requesting a few days off, that she had met old friends who wished to discuss the Lethifold research, but I don't believe that. I was searching for her this weekend."

"And where were you searching?" All the levity suddenly drained from Adrian's voice.

"Western Europe." He tried to determine how best to continue without incriminating himself. "I have reason to believe that one of the former Death Eaters survived, and that he may be interested in her because she knows the cure to the loyalty potion that we were all given before the Final Battle, a potion that nearly killed me." He hoped that was vague enough that Adrian would not suspect he'd had any contact.

"Which Death Eater?" Adrian asked quietly.

"Lucius Malfoy is the only one of the inner circle who survived and evaded capture. I believe it to be him."

"And did you know where to find him?" Adrian asked gravely.

Severus proceeded cautiously. "No. Any of the property he owned outside of Britain has previously been searched. In order for him to have abducted her, he would have needed help, someone who could enter the country and act on his behalf. I know the types of places where that sort of person would most likely be found, and I began questioning people to see if anyone had seen him."

"If you truly believe she has been abducted, you should inform the Ministry."

Severus replied irately, "To what end? She's not in the country, not if Malfoy has her. I am the only one who can find her now."

"You are a senior member of the faculty of Hogwarts. You have responsibilities here," Adrian reminded.

"Responsibilities that another can easily assume for a few days. But I am the only one who can find her." He was losing his temper, and he was finding that he no longer cared. "You have to grant me a week off, at least a few days. It shouldn't take much longer. I know him, and I know how he thinks. I can find him, and thus, her."

After several seconds, Adrian acquiesced, "Very well. You may take time off to search for her... On one condition."

"A condition?" he wondered.

"You are not the only one who has noticed her absence. Remus was supposed to be working with her this weekend. When he found her missing, he informed me that a Death Eater had approached all of you last summer while you were searching for a Lethifold."

"Lupin," Severus growled through gritted teeth. The fact that Lupin had immediately suspected Malfoy bothered him nearly as much as the fact that Lupin had told the headmaster about their trip. "What did he tell you about that?"

"Enough. But that's not relevant. What is relevant is that he, too, suspected a Death Eater. Once we realized that you were missing, presumably on a search for Mrs. McLean, he contacted a friend of his who is an Auror and asked if he could do a little investigation on the side."

Severus could feel a knot forming in his stomach. "Which Auror?" he asked quietly.

"Harry Potter. And he should be here shortly. I sent for him as soon as you returned."

He could feel the color again draining from his face. "Why?"

"That is my condition. I will not have one of my professors engaged in a potentially dangerous activity alone. While you might have preferred Remus's company, I am not willing to grant two of my professors a leave of absence to undertake such a potentially dangerous mission in the middle of the school year."

"You expect me to work with Potter?"

"Severus, this is for your own good." In a kinder voice, he added, "And Aurelia's." There was a knock at the door. "Ah, here he is. Come in," he called, as the door swung open.

"Headmaster," Harry said politely before shooting a scathing look at Severus. "I was able to take some time off without them asking too many questions."

"You will not be undertaking this search as an Auror?" Severus asked.

Harry shook his head. "We don't have any authority to investigate matters outside of Britain, and trying to bring in the Dark Wizard catchers from other countries would be a maddening exercise in bureaucratic tedium. And it would be noticed. What I don't understand is why you didn't turn Malfoy over when you knew where he was? You aren't still working with him, are you?"

Severus glared at Harry. "I would not have spent my weekend traipsing all over the Continent if that were the case."

Adrian interrupted, "That will be quite enough. What happened in the past is in the past. Severus, once you have briefed Harry on where you have already searched, take the time to get your classes in order and get a few hours of rest. The two of you can leave this evening. I assume the establishments you will be searching do not normally attract the most interesting portion of their clientele until later in the day."

"That is correct," Severus replied before conjuring a map. With a flick of his wand, he marked the places he had been with a red 'x' and the places he intended to check now with green ones. "I believe you are smart enough to figure that much out on your own."

As he walked down to his room, the foul mood dissipated, replaced by overwhelming exhaustion. All thoughts of taking some Invigorating Draught, or even a shower, vanished. He collapsed onto the bed and was soon asleep.

When Severus woke, he was momentarily disoriented. Once he realized where he was and what he had to do, he started with a shower. He then proceeded to his office and checked his lesson plans. His lower level classes could follow the standard curriculum. Pomona and Adrian should be able to handle his planned lessons. Deciding he didn't trust anyone else to teach the upper level courses, he penned a quick quiz for the fifth years, and assigned the sixth years a long essay on the properties and uses of the Mandrake root. The seventh years would be given various potions to catalogue.

Before leaving the dungeons to find the headmaster and Potter, he put together a kit with various potions. Searching through the many bottles and vials, he wondered where the Veritaserum was. It might not be ethical, but then again, the people he was likely to be dealing with operated outside the law, both the civil code and the moral one. Besides, he would be in a foreign country, and the Ministry need never know what he had done. All that mattered was Aurelia's safety; he tucked that bottle into his pocket.

Adrian was not in his study, but Potter was waiting there for Severus.

"Are you ready to go?" Harry asked tersely.

"If you are. We shall be starting in Germany, Bavaria to be exact. I assume you have studied the map and have no questions?"

"Not about where we are going." Harry was forced to talk and walk as Severus turned to leave the headmaster's study. "I do have a question about how we are going to find Malfoy."

"You will leave that to me. I am used to dealing with people of that ilk. You are only along to satisfy the headmaster."

"Hold on, this is an Auror matter..."

"Which the Ministry can do nothing about because it is occurring beyond our borders."

Harry said nothing until they were out of the castle. As they were walking towards the gates, he finally asked, "So, this Healer, she's the one you were with at the New Year's Ball, isn't she?" When Snape didn't answer, he continued. "Is she your girlfriend or something?"

"My personal life is not your concern," Severus replied coolly.

"Look, Snape... Professor, she obviously means something to you. I just want to know what."

"Why should it matter?" Severus asked tersely.

"Because I want to know how irrational you are going to be. I know how I would act if someone kidnapped Hermione."

Severus was surprised that there was no scorn in Potter's voice, only sympathy. "She is very... special to me. That is all you need to know," he replied calmly.

Harry wisely elected to say nothing more. Once outside the gates, the two men Apparated to a small Bavarian village.

Severus grabbed Harry's arm. "It would be best if you allowed me to do the talking during the search. In fact, I would prefer if we entered separately."

"We're supposed to be working together," Harry insisted.

"And we will. Just because we are working together does not mean that we need be attached at the hip." He knew that while Potter had calmed down some, the young man was still prone to acting rashly. "It would be best if you watched my back. That would be safer for both of us."

Harry frowned. "I'm that one who's the Auror."

"Yes, but I know more about those we are trying to find." And he was the one with the potion to ensure people were being honest with him. The less Potter knew about that, the better.

After two days, Severus and Harry had searched Germany, Poland and all of the Balkans with nothing to show for their trouble.

"Severus, what if they aren't even in Europe? He could have taken her anywhere." The two of them had reached an uneasy truce and had agreed that using each other's first names would be less obtrusive.

"Not likely. He has never had any ties outside of Europe."

"Well, we're almost out of Europe," Harry said dryly as they entered a rather seedy establishment in Norway. "Are we anywhere near Durmstrang?" he wondered out loud.

"Not really," replied Severus as he charmed the mud off of his boots. "Wait in the corner." He watched Harry take the booth toward the back of the room. He went up to the bar and ordered a glass of *akevitt*. He didn't particularly care for the beverage, but it tended to make the locals more open if he imbibed the native spirits.

Standing at the corner of the bar, he could get a decent view of most of the establishment. He slowly sipped his drink, taking in the atmosphere, trying to decide whom to approach first. After ten minutes, he thought he spotted his marks. A pair of large, blonde gentlemen had been talking animatedly about the latest flying reindeer race, but suddenly switched to hushed whispers when the name of a town that Severus didn't catch was mentioned.

He ordered three more glasses of *akevitt* and, after lacing two of them with a drop of Veritaserum, took them over to the table being careful to keep track of which drink was unadulterated. "Good evening, gentlemen." He placed the glasses on the table, careful of which drink he kept for himself. "I'm looking for a friend who is renting a house in this area. Unfortunately, the owl that was carrying his letter to me dropped it in water, and the exact location was smudged." Since the men did not tell him to go away, he took one of the empty seats and slid the remaining drinks across the table.

"Who is this friend you are looking for?" the smaller of the two men asked.

"He is fair, about your size, and he likes to keep to himself. If I know him, he brought his house-elf with him to do all the work." Severus gave them a small chuckle, letting them know he wasn't the type who even had a house-elf.

"Does your friend have a name?"

Severus watched as the two men sipped their drinks. It would only be a matter of time. "He prefers not to use his true name, in order to maintain a low profile. He's a very private man." Noticing that they weren't entirely trusting of him yet, he continued, "I would have sent an owl asking for the address a second time, but he gets irritated by mistakes like that, and I'd rather he not take it out on my owl. Those birds are bloody expensive, you know. If you don't know where he is, is there another village in the area I could check?"

The two men shared a glance with each other, and then said something in Norwegian. When they were done, the smaller man said, "We have many visitors in this part of the country. Understandably, many are fair."

He tried not to smile triumphantly. He knew they were trying to get more information out of him. With only one drop of Veritaserum, he would have to ask them fairly specific questions, but he couldn't be too obvious in case others were watching. "Of course, but surely you don't get too many Englishmen."

"We get a few."

He was beginning to wish that he had added two drops. "This one is a business associate of mine." Taking a sip from his drink, he waited for them to reply. When they didn't, he continued, "We worked together during recent events in Britain. I come bearing news from home for him as I know he has been away for some time. Surely, you would know of him if he is in the area." His patience had run out. Gripping his wand tightly beneath the table, he leaned closer and whispered, "I know that you are working for Lucius Malfoy. Where is he?"

The two men looked as though they were struggling to keep the information to themselves. "There is a house three miles north of town, set back from the road. It is well protected, though."

"Thank you and have a good evening." He threw a couple of Galleons on the table before departing. While he didn't check, he knew that Harry would be joining him

outside shortly. A part of him just wanted to leave immediately and not involve Harry, but he knew this was one instance where having backup would quite possibly be necessary.

"Did you get the information?" Harry asked once they were away from the building.

"I did. There is a house three miles north of here."

"Let's go," Harry replied eagerly.

"We can't just show up there without a plan. It is quite likely that I can easily get us past whatever wards he will have erected. He might expect me, but I doubt that he would expect me to have an accomplice."

"Then that works to our advantage. Why don't you seek him out first? I can wait out in the hallway; he'll never guess that you've left a second line of defense there. That way, if he gets by you somehow, I'll be there to stop him. And if you need a hand with him, you would only need to shout out for help."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "How do I know that you wouldn't let him do away with me, and then step in to capture him yourself?"

Harry replied seriously, "Severus, we've been on this search for days now. I think we've both learned a lot about each other. I have your back. Don't worry."

Staring deep into the young man's eyes, Severus realized this was the first time that he could not detect malice. With great difficulty, he said words he never thought he would utter. "Thank you, Harry. Now, we should do this before anyone warns Malfoy."

Aurelia woke with a start. She heard a noise and froze where she lay in her bed. She wasn't sure if it was Malfoy paying her another visit or if Severus had finally found her. She knew that he had to be looking for her, but with each day that passed, she began to lose hope, falling deeper under Malfoy's spell.

The door swung open and she saw a dark figure silhouetted in the door. Pulling the blanket up to her chin, she stared fearfully at the figure.

It stepped into the light and spoke, "Aurelia, I've come to take you home."

She couldn't resist laughing softly in relief. "Oh, Severus," she exclaimed happily. Rising from the bed, she crossed the room to the dark figure, only to have it fade away. "No!" she screamed.

Opening her eyes, she realized it had all been just another dream. Again, Severus had not come for her.

Checking the clock on the mantle, she saw that it was late evening, or at least that was what the clock said. Since there was no window in the room, she found it difficult to keep track of time and wasn't sure that the clock was reliable. Lucius was liable to come visit at any time of the day. He hadn't made any more advances, but she could see the look in his eyes. And she could not ignore the fact that his conversation continually made references to the rewards and pleasures that would be hers if only she would do what must be done and help him. It had been nearly a week already. Surely Severus would arrive soon.

She jumped when the door opened. Malfoy entered, followed by a house-elf carrying a tea tray.

"Good afternoon, my dear. You are looking quite tired. I hope that you have been getting enough rest."

She tried to hold onto her hatred for her captor, but she was finding it increasingly more difficult. "You mean you don't know?" she snapped.

"Manners, my dear. We have discussed this before. Good manners are rewarded and bad manners are punished. And I know that you have impeccable manners, so there really is no need to be rude."

She was about to deliver a stinging retort to him, but she knew he would punish her by withholding some of the precious little food he gave her. "I'm sorry," she replied meekly, hoping he would believe the sincerity of her words.

"That's much better," he replied as he poured tea. "You really are making this more difficult than it has to be. It would be so simple for you to assist me, and then I could tell you the full truth. I would think that the fact I cannot discuss it would be proof enough of my sincerity. If it were not the truth, I would be able to tell you the lies."

That made sense to her. If he hadn't been coerced into cooperating with You-Know-Who, he could have told her that he had been. Instead, he had danced around the subject of his loyalty, choosing to concentrate on how much better off wizarding Britain would be with him. It all seemed so plausible. And he would still have to answer to the Ministry, as he was so fond of telling her.

The only thing that bothered her was the confidence with which he seemed to believe that his name would be cleared. If it were not for that fact, she would have been more inclined to trust him.

"Is something bothering you, my dear?" he asked gently.

"Other than the fact that I am still here?"

"I really have made your stay as pleasant as possible. If you wish to go home, you need only brew the cure for me. It's so very simple. It's painless." He reached across the table and took hold of her hand. "And it can be incredibly rewarding. You need only name your price." Picking up her hand, he kissed it. "Say yes and I can have the house-elf prepare a magnificent meal for the two of us."

His words were so easy to believe. There was no harm in helping him; after all, he wanted to help the wizarding world. She was just suffering needlessly, and the thought of a fabulous meal was irresistible. His tender touches clouded her judgment. He wanted her, needed her... She should just say yes.

He pulled her hair back from her neck, and was leaning down to kiss her there when he heard a commotion in the hall. Instantly on alert, he wrapped his arm around her so that he could use her as a shield and then he brandished his wand.

The door flew open and Aurelia could see Severus, wand at the ready. "Severus!"

Malfoy drew her tightly against himself. "Careful, Severus."

"You won't hurt her; you have need of her," Severus said confidently.

"Do I? If you take me back to Britain, I am as good as dead. I believe that you have more reason to want her alive than I do. I would rather live in exile than die. Can you live without her?"

"If you harm her, you will not get out of this house alive."

"We are at a stand-off, Severus. You can't stop me without hurting her. Now, move away from the door."

"Severus," Aurelia pleaded. She needed him to stop Malfoy. He had found her; surely he couldn't just let Malfoy take her away now. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "Help me."

Severus knew that if he tried to stun Malfoy, there would be no guarantees the spell would not affect them both. Malfoy might be able to either attack him or worse, Aurelia. He was not willing to risk her safety, so he reluctantly moved away from the door. This was a tactic that he had not only anticipated but had even dared to hope for.

Malfoy smiled victoriously as he turned to keep Aurelia between himself and Severus. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Severus looked into Aurelia's horrorstricken face. He knew that she felt he was abandoning her, and it cut him more deeply than he had expected. Then suddenly a red flash of light hit Malfoy in the back, and he heard Aurelia scream as she was pulled to the floor by Malfoy's dead weight. Moving quickly to her side, he pulled her into his arms. "Are you hurt?"

She clung desperately to him and sobbed onto his shoulder. "I knew you would come."

Harry had come down the hall and was checking Malfoy. "Is she all right?"

"I think so. Why don't you get him out of here? Before he's questioned, I'll see that he is given the potion that will allow him to testify truthfully."

Harry nodded. "Right." With a wave of his wand, he levitated Malfoy's unconscious form so that he could perform the Side-Along Apparition to take them back to Britain.

After the Auror and his prisoner had left, Severus murmured softly in her ear, in an attempt to calm her. "It's alright now. You're safe. He's gone."

She looked into his eyes and asked cautiously, "You're really here? You really came for me?"

"I always will," he replied before gently kissing her. When he broke the kiss, he helped her to her feet and led her to the bed. He noticed that she was still shaking. "How are you?"

"Much better now that you are here." She touched his cheek, his chest, his arms, as though reassuring herself she was not merely imagining his presence again.

"Once you've calmed down, we'll go home." He couldn't help but notice how drawn and tired she looked.

"Can we leave now? I don't want to be here anymore."

"Anything you want."

She clung to him and whispered, "Stay with me. I don't want to be alone."

"I'm not going anywhere."

A/N: Finally, I have finished this chapter. My most profound thanks go to Zen Lady and nota for their help in digging out all those little inconsistencies and asking me what I was thinking. I have been trying to pare down the number of projects I'm working on so that I can devote more time to this story, but I have very uncooperative muses.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 10

Severus rose from the bed and helped Aurelia to her feet. Holding her protectively, he Apparated them to her front walk. After removing the wards, he led her into the house. He knew that she needed rest and a proper meal. Knowing that she did not want to be alone, he took her to the kitchen. "Let's see what you have to eat, here."

"Not much, I'm afraid. I was on the way back from the market when..." She could not finish her sentence.

After a quick investigation of the pantry revealed nothing he could make a decent meal from, he asked, "Would you be all right if I left for a few minutes to pick something up?"

Terror filled her eyes and she clung to his arm. "No, please, don't go."

Kneeling beside her chair, he placed his hand on her knee, trying to determine what he would do. "Can you make it back to Hogwarts with me? There are many people there, Madam Pomfrey could give you a quick look and make sure you are well, and there are house-elves and a well-stocked kitchen." He knew that it was late enough that his arrival would go unnoticed by most.

She nodded her head. "Okay."

Once they arrived at Hogwarts, they walked very slowly up the drive. He kept his arm around her waist in case she collapsed. Even though she was wearing her heavy cloak, she was shaking. He wasn't sure if it was from the cold or from her experience of the last week.

"Do the girls know what happened to me?"

"I did not tell them. I thought it best they not worry about something they could do nothing about." He wanted to scoop her up into his arms and get her inside the castle as soon as possible, but he wasn't sure she would appreciate it. When she stumbled and nearly fell, he decided he would do what was for the best. "Let me carry you. I don't want you falling and hurting yourself." She didn't protest and snuggled against him.

Adrian met them on the front steps. "How is she?"

"Just exhausted. She didn't want to be alone and I thought it best if I brought her here. Could you send Poppy to my quarters?"

"Of course. And was Malfoy the one responsible?"

"He was, though I would prefer not to talk about it now."

Adrian nodded in understanding. "I'll send Poppy down. We can get together tomorrow afternoon and discuss your schedule."

Talking with Adrian was the last thing that Severus wanted to do. Realizing the headmaster could be useful in more ways than one, he asked, "Could you have some food set to my quarters? It has been a rather long, hard journey."

Adrian nodded. "I'll have the house-elves send some food to your quarters as well."

"Thank you," Severus replied.

When he got down to his quarters, he gently laid her on the bed. A small pop signaled that the house-elves had sent up something to eat. Bringing the tray to the bed, he realized that he hadn't eaten much over the last few days, but he wanted to make sure she was taken care of first. He noticed that she was tentative about eating at first. "You can have as much as you would like. I can send for more." He saw the tears running down her cheek and suddenly felt uncomfortable. He had forgotten how emotional women could be since she was normally so rational. Fighting his instinctive response to insist she stop, he tried to reassure, "You know, you are safe here. No one can hurt you."

Smiling weakly at his response, she replied, "I know." She briefly rested her head against his arm before picking up one of the sandwiches.

Poppy arrived while they were eating and gave her a quick examination. After declaring that other than being slightly malnourished, Aurelia was fine physically, she left. He knew that it would take time for her psyche to heal.

After she had eaten a couple of sandwiches, he thought her color looked a little better and she didn't seem to be shaking anymore.

Leaning back against him, she asked, "Do you think I could shower and change into something else?"

"Of course. You can borrow a nightshirt." He led her to the bathroom, and once she was in the shower, he retrieved a nightshirt from his dresser. He looked at the dingy grey color and contemplated that he might want to actually purchase some new ones, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

When she emerged from the shower, he had already changed into his nightclothes, but was undecided about what their sleeping arrangements would be. He intended to give her some space and would sleep on the sofa. "I think you should get some rest."

As she crawled into bed, she implored, "Hold me?"

He slipped into bed next to her and felt her nestle against him. "Of course." Holding her protectively with his left arm, he noticed that she was almost immediately asleep. His sleep was much longer in coming. Her captivity had changed her, and he was unprepared for those changes. He had always imagined they would sleep together under different circumstances and that they would actually get very little sleeping done. As his thoughts drifted to sex, he could feel himself becoming aroused. Knowing this was not the right time, he tried to shift her so that she was not draped over him as much.

When he woke, he really needed to get up and use the lavatory, but Aurelia was sprawled across him, and he knew he could not move without waking her. "Aurelia." He shook her gently and she moaned softly. Kissing the top of her head to try to get her attention, he continued speaking softly, "I need to get up and you are on my arm."

"Five more minutes," she mumbled.

"I'll only be gone a minute, but I need my arm back." He tried to pull his arm out from under her, but she pinned him tighter. Finally, he was able to extract his arm and slip out of bed. When he returned, he found that she had grabbed his pillow and was holding it tightly. Lying behind her, he wrapped his arm around her.

She nuzzled against him and said softly, "I love you."

He was caught off guard by her declaration. "Aurelia?" When she didn't reply, he just held her protectively wondering if he had not been imagining her words.

She started thrashing in her sleep, waking him. He wrapped his arms and leg around her to keep her from hurting either of them. She was mumbling, but he couldn't make out her words. "Aurelia, you're safe. You're dreaming. Wake up. I'm here. You're safe with me."

When she stopped thrashing, he could hear her panting. "Severus?" she asked cautiously.

"Yes, it's me," he replied softly.

She rolled over and buried her face in his shoulder and began crying. "I was about to give in," she sobbed. "I had given up. I never should have given up. I never should have doubted you would come for me."

He had expected this as he had broken many people as a Death Eater, but he still had no idea how to comfort her. Tentatively placing his arms around her, he considered her words. It stung him that she had given up, but he knew how effective Lucius was at breaking his prisoners. "You have nothing to apologize for. He is very good at what he does. You lasted much longer than his other prisoners," he reassured her. She seemed to draw strength from his touch, and he held her more tightly.

It took her several minutes to calm down. "It was horrible," she whispered weakly.

"I know, but it's over." He held her for several more minutes until she gently pulled away.

"I think I want to take a long, hot shower."

"Of course. I'll get some suitable clothing for you."

"You aren't going to leave, are you?" she asked nervously.

"I'll send a house-elf." While he was waiting for her to emerge from the bath, he retrieved some work from his office and was starting to go through it when he heard a knock at his door. Opening it, he was surprised to find Lupin. "What do you want?" he asked sharply.

"Adrian needs you up in his study."

"Can it wait? She shouldn't be left alone." The last thing Severus wanted to do now was be questioned by the headmaster.

"The Minister is up there and insists on speaking with you. I can stay with her."

He didn't like the idea of leaving her with Lupin, but he knew that she would trust the werewolf over anyone else at the school. "Let me speak with her, first."

"Do you mind if I come in and wait?"

Grudgingly, Severus opened the door and stepped away. He sat in the chair and faced the fire until he heard the water turn off. Slipping into the bathroom, he said, "The Minister of Magic is here about recent events and wishes to speak with me. Lupin will stay with you while I'm gone if you'd like." He saw the indecisiveness in her eyes. "I will return as soon as I can."

"All right. But please hurry back."

"I will. I hope you will find one of the outfits suitable," he said, indicating several dresses hanging on the pegs. He could tell from the look in her eyes that she wanted something more, but he wasn't sure what. He reached out to touch her shoulder, and she wrapped him in an embrace, which he returned, though not as forcefully.

"Thank you," she replied softly.

He hated leaving her, but he knew that she would once again have to learn to be independent and this was a small step.

When Aurelia had finished dressing, she went back into the main room and saw Remus smiling warmly at her.

"It's good to have you back. Can I get you anything? Lunch perhaps?"

"Lunch would be nice," she replied.

After he summoned an elf to bring them lunch, they sat in an awkward silence. Remus finally asked, "So, how are you feeling?"

She considered his question for several seconds. "Better, I guess. It's hard to believe that I'm not his captive anymore."

Remus smiled weakly. He had seen torture victims before, and he knew the mental scars would take a long time to heal. "It'll get better, but it will take time."

Lunch arrived and they moved to the small table under the high window and ate in silence. Aurelia stopped in mid bite. "Your Wolfsbane potion. I won't be able to get to it."

He placed his hand on hers. "Don't worry about it. Severus will brew the standard potion for me. We can continue research next month." Deciding to try to keep her mind off of anything likely to stir up guilty feelings, he started telling her about his classes, especially the ones her daughters were in.

Severus waited for the gargoyle to admit him and rode the staircase to the top. Normally, he would have walked up the stairs, but he was still collecting his thoughts. When he knocked on the door, he heard Adrian immediately reply, "Come in."

Glancing around the room, he saw that Adrian, the Minister and Harry Potter were seated by the fireplace instead of around the headmaster's desk.

"Severus, glad that you can join us. How is Aurelia this morning?"

"Somewhat better, though I believe it will be a long recovery."

"Unfortunately, I fear that you are right. I sent an owl to Marcus Stillwater last night, letting him know that we had recovered his missing Healer. I received his reply this morning and they would naturally like to examine her there."

"I will take her there when she is ready." He took the seat that Adrian offered him. "Minister," he said and nodded his head curtly. His eyes briefly met Potter's but he said nothing.

"Harry has given me a fairly detailed briefing about your search, but I would like to hear your version as well. Especially since you were the one in the room with Malfoy."

Severus bit back a scathing response and quickly recapped the events of the last week. He was interrupted several times to answer questions, but the Minister was not really interested in the specifics of the search. He was more concerned about the circumstances surrounding the capture. He explained how they had located the house and that they had managed to catch the wizard Malfoy had employed as a guard not paying attention to his duties. They had subdued both him and the house-elf Malfoy had, though the creature had been somewhat adamant about protecting his master.

The Minister finally broke the silence, "Well, that pretty much matches what Harry said. He also mentioned you have a potion for Malfoy that will allow him to testify?"

"I do. Though, due to the nature of the potion, I must be the one to administer it."

"Surely, a Healer..."

"Healer MacLean is the only one with any experience with this potion, and I will not subject her to being in his presence again."

The Minister did not look at all comfortable about being bullied. "When can you have this potion ready?"

"This afternoon. Where is he being held?"

"Azkaban, of course."

Severus grimaced. This would add time to his absence as one could not simply Floo to Azkaban. "If Aurelia is ready to go to St. Mungo's tomorrow, I will administer the potion while she is being examined."

"We need to begin our interrogation immediately."

"Minister, he can rot in Azkaban for a day or two. It will give him time to get used to his new place of residence before it becomes permanent." As he watched the Minister, he had the impression the man was hiding something, but he knew better than to use Legilimency as that was something that would surely be detected.

"Understand we need this taken care of as soon as possible. I will give you until tomorrow. If not, I will cite you for failure to cooperate with a Ministry official on official business." The Minister rose and addressed Adrian. "Thank you for your time."

Severus watched the Minister leave and Potter trailing behind. "Is that all?" he asked Adrian.

"Not all." Adrian sighed. "I know that what has happened has hurt Aurelia, and that you want to take care of her, but you do have responsibilities here. She is welcome to stay here as long as she sees fit, but I would ask you to resume at least some of your teaching responsibilities and your Deputy Headmaster duties."

"Adrian..."

The headmaster raised his hand, asking for silence. "I do not need you to teach all your classes. I arranged a substitute who is handling your lower level classes, but your more senior students do need you back in the classroom. Take another day or two and see how she is feeling. In the mean time, you can handle some of the administrative work in your quarters. We both know that she will need to return home sooner rather than later and re-assimilate back into society. She also has responsibilities and you cannot shelter her forever. Perhaps she could start spending days with Madam Pomfrey. Using her skills again might help her recovery."

Severus found that he could not argue with any of these ideas. "I will speak with her about your ideas."

"Thank you. And her children?"

"I will speak with her about that, as well."

"It had best be today. It will be in the morning paper. It all happened late enough last night that they couldn't get it in today's Daily Prophet."

"I see," Severus replied cautiously before rising to leave.

As he walked down the stairs, he decided he would have to bring up the girls first. That was the most important hurdle to overcome.

When he reached the bottom, he saw that Potter was waiting for him. "Is there something else you needed?"

"I just wanted to say that I thought we made a good team. I wouldn't have been able to find Malfoy without your help. Thanks for allowing me to come with you."

This was more than Severus had ever expected to get from Potter. He had spent six years tormenting the boy, punishing him for the sins of his father. "Adrian was right. I wouldn't have been able to rescue her on my own. You make an excellent Auror." He said nothing more, but Potter was not leaving and obviously expected something else. Severus thought he knew what it was, but he wasn't sure he would bring himself to say the words. He had spent so long hating both Potters, even though he knew that the younger one was not deserving of that hatred. "Thank you," Severus finally said. "For everything. You trusted me when others probably wouldn't have."

Potter smiled slightly. "You're welcome, Severus. I hope that she recovers quickly. And don't worry, I'll make sure Malfoy pays." He finally walked down the corridor, leaving Severus to make his way to the dungeon.

When he arrived, he slowly opened the door and could hear Aurelia laughing. He found that it stung that it was Lupin she was laughing with. It should have been him. Peering through the crack in the door, he saw that they were sitting across from each other by the fire. Opening the door, he said, "You may go now. Thank you for your time."

The smile did not leave Remus's face as he rose. After giving Aurelia a kiss on the cheek, he said, "I'll come by later."

"Thank you, Remus," she replied.

Severus scowled at his departing colleague.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Much as I expected. The Minister wanted to hear my accounting of events, and I will have to take some of the potion to him so that he will be able to testify." He really didn't want to talk about it.

"And...I'll have to testify, won't I?" she asked nervously.

He led her to the sofa and held her hand. "Eventually, yes, I would expect so. Perhaps we can arrange for you to give a statement so you won't have to see him again."

"I hope so." She clung to him, drawing comfort from his presence.

He was beginning to realize that touch was very important to her, even though it made him uncomfortable, but he was not willing to tell her that, at least not now. "There is something we do need to discuss. I kept your absence from Julia and Helen, and as there was no proof you had been abducted, it was never reported in the paper. That will all change tomorrow morning. I think you should tell them what happened." While he was speaking, he had managed to extract himself from her tight embrace.

Terror once again filled her eyes. "I...I don't think I can. You do it."

He had not expected this. "Even if I tell them what happened, they will want to see you."

"And I want to see them, but I'm not ready to talk about it."

"I will try to explain that to them, but they will have questions that they may not be able to contain."

"I know. But it's just too soon."

"Marcus would also like you to go to St. Mungo's for examination."

She sighed. "I knew he would. When?"

"As soon as possible. He wants to help you recover."

"I know. It's just..." She collapsed back against him.

"You are welcome to stay here as long as you like. Adrian and I think it would be best for your recovery. When you feel up to it, you can work with Poppy in the Infirmary."

"I suppose I can't hide here with you forever, can I?" she asked almost playfully.

He was momentarily dumbstruck by her question. "Unfortunately, no." He could hardly believe what she had just said. She wanted to be with him. He decided to enjoy the feel of her in his arms for a little while longer before going to talk to the girls. "I think I should go tell them now," he said when he realized holding her any longer might lead to him behaving in a manner that she wasn't ready for. In the past, the only time a woman had touched him was a precursor to intimate behavior, and his body kept responding to her touch.

"I know."

"I'll bring them here after I'm done speaking with them." Leaning down, he gave her a slow lingering kiss. When she placed her hand on the back of his head, he gently opened her mouth and deepened the kiss. Knowing that she was still vulnerable, he pulled away. "I'll be back soon."

"Okay," she said softly, with a tinge of disappointment. He was nearly to the door when she stopped him. "Severus?" Once he turned back to face her, she continued nervously. "Thank you for coming for me."

"I will always come for you," he replied softly. She looked as though she wanted to say more, but she remained silent.

Before taking the girls from class, he had to see where Julia was. He knew that Helen would be in Potions. To his dismay, he saw that Julia had Defense Against the Dark Arts. Heading up to the third floor, he decided to get her first.

Opening the door to Lupin's classroom, he waited until he was acknowledged. "Professor Lupin, I need to speak with Miss MacLean."

"Of course. Julia, you are excused. Take your books with you."

Julia looked confused as she walked out of the classroom. Once they were in the hall walking back to the dungeons, she asked, "Professor, what's this about?"

"I will explain in a moment." He left her in his office while he went to retrieve Helen. Once both girls were seated in his office, he realized he didn't know where to start. "As you noticed, I have not been teaching classes this week. Last week, your mother sent a letter to her coworkers saying she was taking a few days off to meet with people abroad. I...found this suspicious and investigated further."

"Is mum okay?" Julia interrupted.

"She is. You may see her in a few minutes, but she asked me to explain what had happened to you. She is not really to talk about it, yet. One of the escaped Death Eaters was suffering from the same affliction that I was last summer. He wanted your mother to cure him, so he abducted her. It took me several days, but I was able to find her and bring her here. She wanted you to know since it will be in tomorrow's *Prophet*. I will ask that you not ask her about her captivity."

"Will she be staying here?" Julia asked as she hugged her sister.

"For a while, yes. Arrangements will be made for you to see her while she is here. She will seem different. She has been through quite a bit."

"Did he hurt her?" Helen asked, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Not physically, but there are other ways to hurt someone." And he would make Lucius pay for what he had done. He would take the cure with him, but he would make sure it was a painful cure. "Are you ready to see her?"

Both girls nodded and he led them down the hall to his quarters. Before opening the door, he said, "You are to tell no one that you have been here. These are my private quarters, and I am allowing entry as a personal favor to your mother. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor," they answered in unison.

Opening the door, he watched the girls rush into the room. He watched Aurelia wrap her arms around her children and they all started crying. Feeling uncomfortable with all the emotion, he said, "I will be in my office, catching up on paperwork. You can come there when they leave."

He had only just sorted through a small portion of the parchment on his desk when there was a knock at the door. "Come in," he called in an irritated voice. He doubted it would be Aurelia already.

Eileen entered his office. "I heard that you had returned. How is she doing?"

"Recovering. I'm quite busy and don't really have time to talk right now."

Undeterred, she took a seat across from him. "How are you doing? You look quite tired."

Setting down his quill, he replied. "It was a tiring search, but I will recover."

"She's staying here, correct?"

"For the time being. Do you disapprove?"

"Not at all. You do realize that everything has changed since you were last together."

"I am aware of that fact," he replied shortly.

"That's good. You just need to take it slow, let her set the pace."

He was starting to get irritated. "That is exactly what I was doing before. I do not intend to change my behavior."

"I just want to make sure that you don't do anything to push her away. I made that mistake once."

"You?" He had never thought of his mother with anyone other than his father.

"He was a nice wizard. A little older than me, but I feared that I would never find anyone else and I ended up pushing him away. But enough of that. Be there for her. And don't rush telling her you love her. She might not be ready for it."

"I think that she is. When I left to get her children, she stopped me and thanked me, but I thought she wanted to say something more. I think she might have been waiting for me to say it first." He elected not to tell Eileen that he thought Aurelia had said it last night.

"Perhaps she is. You will know when the time is right. Be there for her."

"She is staying in my quarters. It is rather hard for me not to be there for her," he said dryly.

"That's not what I mean. She's going to need a lot of emotional support... And I know that you are not an emotional man. She needs to know that you are there for her, that you care for her. Touch her, hold her, reassure her. Touch is very important."

A fact that Severus has already been discovering. She almost seemed to be clinging to him at times. There was another knock at his door, and he said, "Enter."

"I sent the girls... Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you would have anyone here," Aurelia said.

Severus shared a meaningful glance with Eileen. This was not the time. "Irma came to welcome me back."

Eileen rose to her feet and crossed the room. "Aurelia, good to see you again. I'll leave the two of you alone."

Once they were alone, Aurelia said, "Thank you for bringing them by. I know they must have questions, but they were very well behaved."

Severus gave up on trying to get any work done and rose from his desk. "They are better behaved than most their age and they were quick to grasp the severity of the situation."

"Oh, I don't know that it's that severe. I just need time to sort through it all."

"Did you want to return to my quarters?"

"I'd like to take a walk, get out a bit. I was trapped in that room for far too long."

"The weather is not very pleasant, but I do know that greenhouse two should be deserted. We could walk there."

She smiled warmly. "I'd like that."

After they retrieved their cloaks, he led her to the greenhouses, grateful that it was during class. The last thing he needed were the students gossiping about his personal

life. As he had suspected, greenhouse two was deserted. Leaving their cloaks by the door, he wrapped his arm around her as they walked through exotic plants. When they reached a bench by a small fountain, they both sat down. Neither one of them had said anything since leaving his office.

He watched her, trying to evaluate the changes her captivity had wrought. She looked up at him and he could see the pain in pale blue eyes. But behind the pain was something else. Placing his hand on her cheek, he tried to determine what he should say. Was the time right? Was she waiting for him? How would he say it?

She reached up and gently brushed his lips with hers. She remained close to him and whispered, "I love you, Severus."

His heart nearly leapt out of his chest. He was too surprised to speak or move for several seconds. The words finally stumbled out of his mouth. "I love you, too." He pulled her close for a deep kiss and only pulled away when he heard the bell. "There is a class due here in a few minutes."

"Of course," she replied, sounding slightly miffed.

As they walked back to the castle, Severus realized that he had missed an incredible opportunity. "How are the girls?"

"They really don't understand what happened, which is fine. I don't need them to understand it all. I only discussed the potion he wanted me to brew for him."

Realizing she wasn't ready to talk about it, they finished walking back to the dungeons in silence. "How about a chess match?" he asked.

They played until dinner, and then paused to eat before resuming the match. Analyzing the board, he thought he finally had her. Moving his queen, he saw that he would have her checkmated in three moves. "Do you concede?" he asked smugly.

She flashed him an equally smug smile. "I don't think so." She then moved her knight and announced gleefully, "Checkmate!"

He stared at the board in shock, positive that she was wrong. His grin turned into a frown as he saw that she was not.

"Are you going to be a sore loser and knock down all the pieces?" she asked playfully as she leaned over the table, resting her chin on her laced fingers.

"How?" He still wasn't sure how she had beaten him.

"You're cute when you're confused."

She still had that infernally smug smile on her face, but there was a playful twinkle to her eyes. "Why you little..." He started to rise from his chair and she quickly slipped out of hers and stood behind it. "You cheated." He tried to close the distance between them, but she moved away from him.

"Admit it, the better person won," she said playfully.

He finally caught up to her. "Call me cute, will you?" he asked as he wrapped her in his embrace and then pressed his lips against hers.

"I will if you kiss me like that again," she said coyly.

He gave her much more passionate kiss that took her breath away. "Is that better?"

"Much," she panted as she started unbuttoning his robes and slipped her hands inside them.

A/N: As always, I would like to thank Zen Lady and nota for their help with this story. They are both wonderful beta readers who keep me in line. Now, you may all commence throwing rocks at me for ending on that sort of cliffhanger. I will do my best to have the next update not take quite as long as the last couple have taken. I have wrapped up one of the projects I was working on and another is nearing completion, so I should be able to get the muses to pay more attention to this story.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 11

They kissed each other hungrily, fumbling with each other's robes, and were soon lying in bed, naked. To both ward off the cold and conceal his body, he pulled the covers over them. She had reached down and was stroking his cock. He moaned at her touch, realizing it had been far too long. He started kneading her breast.

She pulled his hand away and whispered, "Not so hard."

He cursed himself for his inexperience. Pleasuring his partner was not something he was accustomed to. Normally, the woman was there to please him. He cupped her breast more gently, but still was not sure exactly what he should be doing.

She gently pushed his head down and offered him her breast. He circled her nipple with his tongue.

"Oh, yes," she moaned softly, arching her back and encouraging him to continue. She also reached down and placed his hand between her legs.

This was something he thought he could do. He slipped two of his fingers inside her and began gently circling and rubbing, teasing her, making sure she was ready for him.

"I want you," she whispered hoarsely after a few minutes.

He positioned himself to enter her. His first attempts were clumsy and a bit off-center. With her help, he finally slipped inside her. At first, he relished the slick warmth, but her hands on his backside encouraged him to set a pace. He lost himself in the moment and soon quickened his rhythm, his biological urges dictating his actions. As the

orgasm washed over him, he gave one last thrust and then froze.

A few moments after he had finished, he opened his eyes, and even in the dim light, he could see the look of disappointment on Aurelia's face. He silently cursed himself. She was not a Knockturn Alley whore who charged by the quarter-hour. He should have taken his time, seen to her needs, but he had been so overcome by the moment that he had lost control. Rolling beside her, he apologized, "I'm sorry."

She smiled weakly. "Don't worry about it. The first time tends to be awkward. We can try again, later."

He continued to curse himself. This was something he had been anticipating for months, something that should have been memorable for both of them. Instead, he had been selfish and thought only of his satisfaction. Even so, she still snuggled against him. He didn't have long to be disgusted with himself as he was now utterly exhausted.

Aurelia watched Severus sleep. She hadn't expected fireworks their first time together, but she had still expected something more than that. Reminding herself that his life had been very difficult and that he was still emotionally introverted, she resigned herself to being patient. After all, inside his gruff exterior was the man she loved.

When she felt that enough time had passed, she began gently caressing his chest, his stomach, her hand moving lower until she reached her goal. Rubbing his flaccid member, she could feel it growing erect. She heard him moan softly and she whispered into his ear, "Severus." When he didn't respond, she licked the outer edge of his ear and nipped at the edge of the lobe. "Time to wake up." Rubbing against him, she wanted to leave no doubt in his mind about why she was waking him up.

As Severus regained awareness, he leaned toward Aurelia for a kiss. As he deepened the kiss, he tried to roll on top of her, but she put her hands up against his chest.

"My turn," she whispered devilishly before straddling him. If she was on top, she knew that she could maintain control of the situation and keep him from being carried away again by over-exuberance. Carefully, she lowered herself over him, closing her eyes as she felt him enter her.

Slowly, she began rocking. She kept her pace slow but steady, refusing to let him dictate the situation. When he tried to roll her over so that he could be on top, she shoved him back against the bed. "Not yet." As she could feel her orgasm coming she quickened the pace somewhat, reveling in the feel. He was thrusting into her, trying to get her to move even more quickly.

"Aurelia," he pleaded.

The devilish part of her mind took over and she slowed her pace slightly, wanting to enjoy the sensations of the moment, knowing that once they reached orgasm, it would be over. Plus, she wanted him to suffer a bit for his selfish performance earlier.

When she thought he had been punished enough, she rode him hard, hurrying herself to release. She cried out his name as she came, bringing him along with her. Once they were both sated, she collapsed atop him and kissed him. "Much better," she said approvingly.

"Yes, much," he replied. She shifted so that she could lie beside him, though she kept her arm and leg wrapped around him. "Feel free to wake me up like that any time."

"I thought you might like that, and I know that I needed it." She suddenly felt much safer than she had in days and quickly drifted off into a sound sleep.

The sunlight streaming through the small transom window was shining directly in Severus's eyes, waking him from a deep slumber. He started to move and realized that Aurelia was draped over him. Watching her, he could see a look of contentment on her face.

Today, he would take her to St. Mungo's. It was time for her to face what had happened. Dear Merlin! In the heat of the moment, he had forgotten just what had happened to her. They had both been so willing, neither one of them thinking rationally. And now... He couldn't help but feel he had taken advantage of her. They had consummated their relationship while she was still so vulnerable. He was sure that she would regret the decision, even more than he did.

Slipping out of bed, he decided to take a shower as he suddenly felt incredibly guilty.

While he was dressing in the bathroom, he heard her calling out for him, and he rushed into the other room, his robe only half buttoned. "What is it?" he asked, wondering if she had been woken by a nightmare.

Placing her hand on her chest in obvious relief, she replied, "I...thought you had gone."

Sitting beside her and taking her hands in his, he replied, "I will be with you as long as you need me to be." He could tell that this did not seem to entirely reassure her. "Aurelia?" he asked gently.

"It's because of what happened last night, isn't it?"

He felt his heart sink. He had made a horrible mess of their entire relationship by letting his hormones dictate his actions.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of. I'm sure it's been a long time for you, too, and it was our first time, that's always a bit rough." She moved to nuzzle against him. "But later... You made me a very happy woman. And as we learn about each other, it will only get better."

For the second time in two days, Severus was stunned silent. She wasn't having regrets; she saw a future with him.

"Severus?" she asked as she pulled away to observe his expression.

"I'm sorry. That's not...what I was expecting you to say. I thought you might be upset with me."

She brushed his cheek. "You frustrate me from time to time, but I don't know that I could ever be upset with you." Disentangling herself from the sheets, she straddled his lap and kissed him. As she did so her hands deftly unbuttoned his robes and pushed them from his shoulders.

He suddenly felt very nervous. It was irrational since he knew she had seen him naked many times, but now that they were lovers, he found he was suddenly ashamed of his pale, scrawny body. "I just showered," he said lamely.

"You could shower again."

"You have an appointment at St. Mungo's."

"It's with Marcus. His schedule is flexible... What's wrong?"

He desperately wanted to pull his robe back up. "You've been through something very traumatic. I fear that I might..." He couldn't bring himself to say the words and looked away from her.

"Severus," she said softly. "This is something that I want. You are not taking advantage of me." She brushed his hair away from his cheek. "I love you, and nothing that happened will change that."

He was at odds with himself. Part of him wanted nothing more than to give in to her desires, desires they shared. However, the overly criticizing, always rationalizing voice

that had inhabited some deep, nether corner of his mind for as long as he could remember, whispered now that this sort of behavior could ruin the relationship he had with her. In the past, he had been able to ignore this voice, but in the past, he had been a selfish man. Reluctantly pushing her off his lap, he said, "I love you, as well, and that is why we should wait."

She didn't say anything, but rose from the bed and went into the bathroom.

While in the shower, Aurelia found that she couldn't stop thinking about Severus's words, or rather his actions. He regretted last night. He thought he was taking advantage of her.

Letting the hot water run down her body, she wondered if it was true. Her plan, before her capture, had been to take advantage of the private room to let him know how she felt. Last night she had only finally done what she had intended all along.

Hadn't she?

The clinician in her knew that Malfoy had manipulated her mind during her captivity, and that there was a possibility that she was not thinking properly. Her romantic side knew that she loved Severus and he loved her, too, and that what had happened to her shouldn't matter.

But it did.

She finally decided that there was no changing the past. They would have to go forward from here. Now the question was: would their liaison last night reduce the tension between them or only create more?

Resting her head against the wall of the shower, she found that she did not know. And it was likely that Severus didn't either, which had surely contributed to his behavior.

Turning off the water, she knew that the time for hiding was over and that she had to face him and live with the consequences of their actions.

Once Aurelia was dressed, they ate a light breakfast but said very little. Neither one of them seemed to know what to say to the other.

As she set her napkin down on the table, he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"I suppose putting it off won't make it any better."

"Adrian is allowing us to use his Floo connection," he said as he led her out of the dungeon.

"That's very kind of him."

He could tell that she was frustrated with him, but he already had enough regrets. After this was over, he would find some time alone with her and hope he could get her to see that he was doing the right thing.

Adrian was waiting for them in his office. "Ms. MacLean, you are looking much better this morning."

"Thank you, Professor. I am feeling much better, too. I'd like to thank you for your hospitality."

"Think nothing of it. I know how important it is, to be able to be close to those you love in such traumatic times as these surely must be for you." He smiled warmly at her. "I have had the Floo connected to your office and will leave it open until you return. Take your time." He paused for just a moment, and then continued, "I think that you couldn't ask for a better escort today."

"That's very true. I hope that we won't be gone too long. And I fear that, like most other Healers, I don't much care for being a patient myself."

"Perfectly understandable, my dear. Have a safe journey."

She moved towards the fireplace, but Severus placed his hand on her arm. "Allow me to go first." He wanted to give her a sense of security, even though the odds of anyone waiting to ambush her in her office were incredibly small.

"Of course," she replied.

When she arrived through the Floo, Severus had to catch her so that she didn't fall. "Aurelia?"

"Just a little dizzy. Floo travel has always been incredibly disorienting for me. I just need to sit for a minute and perhaps have a sip of water."

He stepped out into the ward, surprising Angelina Johnson. "Miss Johnson, Healer MacLean requires a drink of water." When she didn't move immediately, he said more tersely, "Water?"

"Oh, right. Sorry, Professor. I'll be right there."

He returned to the office; Johnson was right behind him.

"Healer, it's so good to have you back."

"It's just a visit, Angelina. I have a meeting with Marcus."

"Oh, okay. When do you think you will be coming back?" Johnson asked curiously, clearly aware of Aurelia's plight.

"Soon. Very soon."

Severus could tell that she didn't want to talk about this. "That will be all, Miss Johnson." He shot her a glare that hurried her out of the room. "If I had known that she would bother you with questions such as these, I would have brought the water myself."

Aurelia gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it. You couldn't have known." She slowly drank the glass of water. "I think I'm ready now."

He followed her through the ward and up into the administrative area of the hospital.

"It feels good to be back. I know that must sound strange, but I find that a lot of who I am is tied to being a Healer."

"I will speak with Poppy about having you spend some time in the hospital wing. I think that might be advantageous for you. You would be amazed at the reasons that students are taken to the hospital wing."

She laughed softly. "I somehow doubt that. I'm sure there are every bit as creative as we were as students."

He didn't find this at all humorous given the number of times he had ended up in the hospital wing courtesy of Potter and Black. Thankfully, they had finally arrived at Marcus Stillwater's office.

"Aurelia, so good to see you. I'm so very glad to have you back," he said as he gave her a hug.

"It's good to be back," she replied.

"Ah, Severus. So good to see you again. Thank you for bringing her back safely." He vigorously shook Severus's hand. "Aurelia, will you give us a moment?"

"Of course," she replied, and then she took a seat on Marcus's couch.

Marcus led Severus back out to the reception area. "How was she when you found her? I've seen the Ministry report, but well, it is a Ministry report."

"She was weak. Malfoy had been using hunger to break down her defenses and gain her cooperation."

Marcus furrowed his brow. "Was there any sign that he was using a spell or potion to control her?"

"Not that I could discern, and Poppy Pomfrey found nothing in her examination either."

"We will still give her a thorough examination. I expect that she will be here most of the day. If you come back around mid-afternoon, she should be ready to go home."

"There is one other thing..." He was reluctant to mention it, but he knew that she would have to admit it to eventually. "She...seemed ready to give in to him when I rescued her. She was quite ashamed of this fact."

Marcus nodded and replied soberly, "Well, thanks to the war, we have plenty of experience dealing with torture victims. She may be more difficult than some others precisely because she's too smart for her own good. I'll want to talk with you more when you return."

"Of course. I'll let her know when I'll be back for her." When Marcus waved him in, he returned to the office and sat next to Aurelia. He noticed that Marcus remained in the reception area. "I'm going to leave you in Marcus's capable hands. I need to go to the Ministry and make a statement."

"That's all right. There's no need for you to be here while they poke and prod me," she said glibly.

"This is serious," he started.

"I know. It just makes me feel better to joke about it. I'll be fine." She looked into his dark eyes. "I'm sorry I snapped at you this morning."

"Perfectly understandable. You have been under a great deal of stress. I'll be back mid-afternoon to see how things are going, but you take all the time that you need." He reached down and squeezed her hand gently.

She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm so glad that you are here for me. I love you."

Tentatively, he returned the embrace. "I love you, too." He waited until she started to pull away before releasing her. He still wasn't comfortable with the amount of affection she was showing. He had spent nearly twenty years burying his emotions. "I'll see you this afternoon," he said softly before leaving.

After leaving St. Mungo's, he went to her house to retrieve a dose of the potion that would cure Malfoy. He then went to the Ministry and found himself having to deal with one layer of bureaucracy after another until someone finally escorted him to Azkaban.

He tried to stifle a shiver when he arrived on the barren rock, but he couldn't. This was a fate that Dumbledore had rescued him from all those years ago. It was still miserable and oppressive even with the Dementors gone. He could not imagine what it must have been like while they were still here.

After close to an hour, Malfoy was finally brought to the interrogation room.

"What an unexpected surprise to see you, Severus. I had expected them to send someone from St. Mungo's."

"I have been directed by the Ministry to provide you with a potion that will neutralize the poison administered by Voldemort."

"How considerate of you," Lucius replied amiably.

"I am doing this so that you will be able to testify, tell the Wizengamot how guilty you are. And rest assured, I will be the first witness for the prosecution."

"Of course you will," Lucius said smugly. "I expected nothing less, but I fear that you will be wasting your time. My testimony will only serve to reveal my innocence. Things occurred during the second rise that you know nothing about. You see, we always doubted your sincerity, and thus, there was much that was kept from you."

Severus placed the phial on the table. "Are you sure that it is you who did not know everything? After all, you've spent a great deal of time here. Tell me, Malfoy, have they put you back into your old cell for sentimental reasons?"

Lucius ignored the taunt and stretched his hand out for the phial. Severus's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. "If you did anything to harm her, I swear that not even the walls of Azkaban will keep you safe."

"Harm her? Why on earth would I have harmed her? She was the one who found the cure for the poison; harming her was the last thing on my mind."

Severus squeezed tighter. "If you touched her, caused her any lasting damage..." Even though Malfoy tried to maintain a calm veneer, Severus could see in the other man's eyes that the severity of that threat did not go unnoticed.

Lucius looked away. "You should know better than to try to get into my mind, Snape. You won't learn anything that way. Interesting that you feel something for her. As if someone like her would be interested in the likes of you. In time, she will realize just how damaged you truly are. You were her patient, nothing more."

Severus could feel his anger growing, but he realized that Malfoy was only baiting him. No matter what Malfoy might think, Aurelia loved him, flaws and all. He released the other man's arm. "There is your potion. Reap your *benefits*." He leaned back in his chair to watch Malfoy drink the modified cure. It had been quite simple to ensure that it would not be a pleasant experience.

Not long after Lucius drank the potion, he doubled over in pain and collapsed to the floor. "You...poisoned...me," he gasped.

A cruel grin spread across Severus's face. "Not at all. I just neglected to mention that the cure can be rather unpleasant." He watched in pleasure as Malfoy writhed on the floor, crying out in pain before finally sinking into unconsciousness. Only after he was sure that Malfoy was totally insensible did he step over the prone form and knock on the door. The window slid open and he found himself staring directly into a guard's eyes. "The cure has been administered. Malfoy will be unconscious for approximately six to eight hours. Once he regains consciousness, you may interrogate him." He wished he could participate in the interrogation, but that was a job for Ministry officials. He would have to be content with testifying against his former *friend*. For now, he was glad to be quit of Azkaban.

A/N: My undying gratitude goes to my two betas, nota and ZenLady, who are just wonderful. Hopefully, future chapters will come a bit more frequently, but I had a rough week and weekend. All drama that I won't get into. I hope you are enjoying this story.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 12

By lunchtime, Aurelia had already been interviewed by the Head of Spell Damage, poked and prodded in an assortment of places, and given an inordinate number of tests. Physically, she had been given a clean bill of health. She was enjoying a light lunch with Marcus, who was planning to take her on a walk in the park after lunch to check her psychological damage. She knew that she was repressing the memories, and that she would have to acknowledge them at some point during her recovery, but she did not think she was ready for that yet.

They spent the first half hour walking to a secluded area of the park. Marcus had asked her about every detail of the events prior to her capture, and they had both come to agree that there was nothing she could have done differently. People just did not expect to be attacked in broad daylight and abducted now that the war was over.

The next hour and a half was spent sitting on a park bench, discussing her captivity. Slowly and cautiously, Marcus helped her to open up, face the realities of what had happened. When she needed it, he provided a shoulder to cry on.

"But... I gave up," she moaned tearfully.

He rubbed her back. "After six days. That is a very long time to resist any sort of torture. And you did agree that he was torturing you."

"I know, but I stopped believing that Severus would find me. When he did, he told me that he would never stop looking for me, that he would always come for me. I shouldn't have doubted him."

"Aurelia, listen to me. You were not in your right mind. He was manipulating you, making you weak, molding you so that you would believe what he told you. You did nothing wrong. Do you understand that?" He had gently pushed her away so that they could look into each other's eyes.

She nodded and wiped her nose with her handkerchief. "I do."

"You are the brave woman that I have always known you to be. You resisted for six days, believing that Severus was looking for you. How many of those we've treated could say the same?"

"Not many."

"Good. Now, there is one more thing we need to talk about."

She was tired and ready to go back to Hogwarts. It had been a very trying day, and she was still not completely recovered from her ordeal. "Do we have to? Can't I come back tomorrow?"

He patted her knee. "This won't take long, and this is friend to friend, no more patient-doctor. How long were you planning on staying at Hogwarts?"

"I don't know. A week, give or take. I hadn't really thought about it, yet."

"I'm not trying to rush you. I want you to take as much time off as you need. We don't need you returning to work before you are ready. And should I assume that Severus is taking care of you?"

She could tell there was something hidden behind that question. "He's being very attentive, yes."

"That's good. You know that you have been through something very traumatic, something that's going to have a profound effect on you for a long time."

"Of course I do. Marcus, what are you getting at?" She was growing impatient at the indirectness of his conversation.

He sighed. "I think you should be very careful with him. Both of you have been through some rather traumatic events in the recent past, and not just your recent captivity. Sometimes two wounded souls will come together for mutual support. I worry that's what's happening with the two of you. After all, he was your patient, and you were a friendly face there for him. You helped him when everyone else had given up."

"You think we're wrong for each other?" She couldn't believe that he was butting into her personal life like this.

"Calm down. That's not at all what I'm saying. I'm telling you that you need to be careful. Right now, you want comfort, and he's there to provide that comfort. It's just... We all know what his background was."

She was getting very defensive. "Yes, was. He has been completely exonerated. I know about his colorful past. We have discussed it at great length. I think that I know a side of Severus that no one else does. And don't you think I'm old enough to make my own decisions about my life?"

He looked around to see if they were being watched. "I do. I also know that you have been terribly lonely since Henry was killed. And I think you are smart enough to know that the first offer to come along may not necessarily be the best. It might well be, but it might not. If you decide to pursue a relationship with Severus, make sure it's for the right reasons, not because he was the first man to pay attention to you. You are still a very attractive young woman."

"So you think he's not good enough for me?"

"It's good that you are angry with me."

"Stop psychoanalyzing me and answer the question," she snapped.

"I don't know the answer to that question. You are the only one that does. I just want you to start looking at why you are becoming involved with him. Do you pity him or do you love him? There is a substantial difference between the two. Does he return your love? Or is he even capable of love? Aurelia, you have seen his medical record. Do you pity him?"

She had seen his record, and she knew that not only was he repressed emotionally, but also his years as a double agent had taken a mental toll on him. Over time, she had gotten him to open up to her. But was she doing it out of love or out of duty to her patient? This morning, she had sworn that she loved him. Now, she wasn't so sure. "I'm ready to go now," she said coldly as she stood and began walking back to the hospital.

He fell in step beside her. "Of course. If you would like to come back later and talk again, my door is always open to you." When she snorted in reply, he continued, "I have always thought of you as a daughter. Forgive me if I am being overly concerned about your well-being."

She really wanted to be mad at him, but after her parents had disowned her, Marcus had stepped up to the role of father figure admirably, and his advice had never steered her wrong before. He had never told her what to do; he merely made sure that she examined things from every point of view. She sighed. "I know. And I thank you for your concern, but I can make my own decisions in this matter. I know things that you do not."

He placed his arm around her waist. "I thought that you might. I just don't want to see you get hurt. He has a very dark past, and you may not be ready to deal with that."

They finished the walk back to the hospital in silence.

Severus returned to St. Mungo's to find Marcus's office deserted. The man's secretary had told him that Marcus and Aurelia had been gone for nearly two hours. After flipping through the medical journals on the small table next to the couch, he perused the bookshelf, looking for something interesting. He wasn't sure how much longer he would have to wait for the two of them to return.

As he flipped through the book, Lucius's words kept echoing in his mind. Shoving them aside as best he could, he told himself that anyone who would wake him for sex must feel something for him. On more than one occasion, she had told him that she loved him. Malfoy's words were meaningless.

After an hour of waiting, he heard the door open. The scowl on her face quickly turned into a smile when she saw him. He braced himself for the hug that she would undoubtedly give him.

"I'm so glad you're here. I'm ready to go now." She wrapped her arms around him.

He gently patted her on the back. "Of course."

Before they could leave, Marcus said, "My door's open if you need to talk. I think we made good progress today."

"Thank you," she replied, still a bit coldly.

Severus could tell that something unpleasant had happened, but he knew this was not the place to ask her about it, if she would even be comfortable talking to him about it at all. He was painfully aware that she could blame him for several things. For not having turned Lucius over to the authorities in the first place. For not rescuing her sooner. For not having set better wards. He should have known to start up north, not waste his time searching mainland Europe. He had let her suffer for far too long at the hands of a monster.

They walked to her office in silence, and he offered to go through the Floo first, in case she was once again disoriented upon arrival in Adrian's study.

When he stepped out of the fireplace, he was relieved to see the study was deserted. He reached for her arm to steady her as she jumped out of the fire. "How do you feel?"

She put her hand to her head. "I'll be fine. But I think I'd like to lie down for a little while before dinner."

"Of course." Checking the clock on the wall, he saw that it was in between classes. "If you wouldn't mind waiting a few minutes, I would prefer to wait until the students are in class."

"Of course," she replied and took a seat in one of the chairs.

They didn't say anything until after the bell rang, and Severus said, "Are you ready?"

She stood and hooked her arm in his. "Definitely. I'm exhausted."

When they arrived in his rooms, she sat on the edge of the bed and took off her shoes. "Hold me?"

He crawled into bed behind her. She rolled over so that she was facing him and nuzzled against his chest. "Did you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"Not right now." She was silent for long enough that Severus thought she had fallen asleep when she added. "I like the way this feels."

"So do I," he replied. He thought it sounded incredibly trite, but it was the truth. "Do you regret last night?" he finally asked. That question had been nagging him for quite some time.

"Not at all," she replied. After a moment, she pulled back a little. "Do you?"

"A little. I worry that we may have rushed things."

Tracing his jaw, she replied. "We didn't. That dinner we were supposed to meet for? I was going to tell you that I love you, that I want to be with you. Nothing that happened to me changed that."

"I should have done more to rescue you." He knew the first step to overcoming guilt was addressing the subject behind it. That was what all the Healers at St. Mungo's had told him, anyway.

"You did the best that you could. You had no idea where he might have taken me."

He was astounded by what she was saying. "How is it that you can see it all so clearly? So easily not blame me? I should have listened to you and turned him in."

"I learned long ago that you cannot change the past, but must live with the consequences of your actions. None of us can see the future and be sure of all the possible ramifications of the things we do. None of us are perfect, and I'm okay with that." Her hand traced lazy circles on his chest. "If you want to slow things down, that's all right."

"I just want to give you time to recover properly. And I do think we need to talk about what you went through, but only when you are ready."

She rested her head back down on his chest. "Soon. I promise."

By the end of the first week, Severus had returned to full time teaching. Aurelia was still at the castle, and she had begun working with Poppy in the infirmary. When she wasn't in the infirmary, she could be found in his private lab, continuing her Wolfsbane Potion research.

Sometimes, she would tell him about things that had happened while she had been held captive, but he thought that she had not told him everything yet. He was getting used to having her in his quarters, and he knew it was only a matter of time before she returned home and resumed her job at St. Mungo's. He was not looking forward to that day.

After he finished with his seventh year class, he stopped by the lab, but found she was gone. When he opened the door to his quarters, he heard her laughing with Lupin, and it grated on his nerves that she had invited the werewolf into his private space.

"Lupin," he said coldly.

They both looked up at him. Aurelia said, "Severus, I hope you don't mind, but we decided to take a break and have some tea. Would you like some?"

"No, thank you," he replied.

After several seconds of ensuing uncomfortable silence, Remus said, "I think I'll be going. I'll see you tomorrow about the next phase." Before he left, he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

Severus was fuming. He tried not to say anything, knowing that he should not be feeling so insecure.

Aurelia patted the sofa beside her. "Why don't you have a seat even if you won't have some tea?"

He considered her question for a moment before sitting on the sofa with her, though he sat on the far end. "Did you have a nice tea with Lupin?"

She sighed. "We did. After I finished the latest stage of the potion, he began telling me about Kalliope."

Arching an eyebrow, he said, "Oh?"

"Yes. He's quite taken with her. She sounds like a nice woman."

Severus snorted. Aurelia had no idea what sort of woman Kalliope was. He was almost positive that Kalliope was not the sort of woman interested in settling down. Still, he finally accepted the cup of tea.

"He's invited us out to dinner tomorrow. It'll be a double-date."

He nearly choked as he swallowed the tea. "Double-date?" he sputtered.

"Is there something wrong with that? I'd kind of like to get out of the castle, and I think it would be nice to meet Kalliope since Remus is such a good friend."

This was an aspect of their relationship he had not considered. He had come to tolerate Lupin, but he did not want to consider the man a friend. Unfortunately, she did, and he realized that like it or not, he would be seeing a lot of Lupin. "No, there's nothing wrong with that. I just wasn't sure you were ready to go out in public yet."

"I'm feeling much better. And I think going out is for the best." She looked away.

"What is it?"

"I think it's about time for me to return to work. I'm planning on going back on Monday."

"I see," he said quietly.

Scooting across the sofa, she wrapped her arms around him. "I'm going to miss being here, but I can't just not return to my work."

He knew that she was right, but he had grown accustomed to having her here with him. He placed his arm around her shoulder. "I know. I just want to make sure that you really are ready."

"I am. And you can come spend weekends with me, or I can come here, and we can still meet for dinner. Maybe we can plan a vacation for Easter?"

It took him a moment to regain his composure before he could respond. That was the last thing he had expected her to say. "What about the girls?"

"Julia was going to stay here preparing for O.W.L.s, and I'm sure she could keep an eye on Helen."

He wasn't sure what he thought about that. So far, the two of them had not mentioned to anyone the fact that their mother was staying at Hogwarts with him. He wondered what they would think about him taking her on vacation somewhere.

As he prepared for the "double-date" with Lupin, Severus took longer than usual to dress. He was in no hurry, since he didn't really want to spend the evening with Lupin.

"Are you ready yet?" Aurelia asked impatiently.

"Yes," he replied.

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "It won't be so bad."

He assumed this was one of many sacrifices he would be making. Now that he thought about it, he realized that his life had been full of instances where he had made sacrifices for others. He sighed. "I'm ready."

It was shortly after the start of dinner for the students when they departed, so there was no one wandering about the hallways, for which he was quite grateful. It was not that he was ashamed of Aurelia; he just had a reputation to maintain.

Once they were away from the castle, she looped her arm in his, and he involuntarily stiffened at the intimate touch.

"Why do you do that?" she asked softly.

"I'm unaccustomed to people touching me," he replied simply.

"Do you not like it when I touch you?"

He placed his hand on hers. "I enjoy your touch very much." She relaxed at his reassuring words and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" The night was clear and cold, but there was no breeze, making it quite tolerable.

He looked up at the stars and realized that it had been a very long time since he had admired a night. Normally, he paid no notice to the sky, and he had forgotten how bright the stars could be.

When they arrived at the Three Broomsticks, Remus and Kalliope were waiting for them.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were going to make it," Remus said.

"I just wanted to enjoy the walk down from the castle," Aurelia replied, keeping secret the fact that Severus had been stalling.

Over dinner, Severus made very little conversation. He preferred to observe. He noticed that Kalliope was practically hanging all over Lupin. The two of them couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other. Personally, he found the overt display of affection in such a public setting quite distasteful. Especially when Lupin fed her a bit of his meal off his fork. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Aurelia, trying to gauge her reaction to the amorous display across the table from them.

Near the end of the meal, the two women were chatting about the latest fashions and which colors were likely to be popular during the coming spring. Lupin was looking at him as though he expected the Potions master to engage him in conversation.

"Thanks for coming out to dinner, Severus," Remus said. "I know you aren't much for social events."

"I have been known to make exceptions from time to time." His tone indicated that he did not want to continue the conversation. Thankfully, Lupin took the hint. He thought about the fact that Aurelia would be leaving in just a few short days. Given the current state of their relationship, he could think of no reason to ask her to stay.

She put her hand on his forearm. "I think I'm ready to head back now. Remus and Kalliope are going to stay a bit longer."

"Of course," he replied, pleased that she did not want to stay and socialize. Reaching into his pocket, he paid their portion of the bill. Once they were outside, Aurelia once again looped her arm in his and leaned into him. He felt like he should say something, but he wasn't sure what it was.

"Thank you, again," she replied. "I know that you aren't much for things like that."

"You're quite welcome." He realized it was an incredibly weak thing to say.

She stopped him and reached up to give him a kiss. "I really do appreciate it."

Brushing her cheek, he replied, "There are many things that I do for you that I would do for no other."

Smiling back at him, she replied, "I love you, too." Taking his arm again, she continued walking back to the castle.

Severus arrived in the library shortly after it opened. There were no students there yet. Seeing Eileen sitting behind the counter, he approached her and said, "She's leaving."

"Leaving you?"

"No. Leaving the castle."

She set down her book. "She does have a job at St. Mungo's."

"I realize that. I've just... gotten used to having her here. I didn't consider that she would be leaving."

Sounding sympathetic, she replied, "Surely you did consider it."

"I did, but just not this soon. It's only been a little over a week. That cannot be enough time for her to have come to terms with what happened to her."

"Where is she now?"

"In the hospital wing."

"The fact that she is working should have told you that she was ready. From what you've said, she is a very strong woman. Have you told her how you feel about her going?"

"Of course not. I would sound like a sentimental fop if I did." He had picked up the book Eileen had been reading and flipped the pages. "And I am not a sentimental fop. I just enjoyed having her here. It reminded me of last summer. We talk late into the night. I enjoy her company." He hesitated. "I love her, Mother."

"And she knows that?"

"Yes. I have told her." He paced a few seconds. "She asked me about spending the Easter holidays with her. Alone. No children."

A broad grin spread across Eileen's face. "That's wonderful."

"But does it mean anything?"

"I think you know what it means," she replied coyly.

"I don't know that I'm ready for that. I love her as I have never loved anyone else..."

"And you enjoy her company. You know what the next step is."

"It is a very large step," he said dryly.

"One that you cannot keep secret. Is that what frightens you about it?"

"I am not frightened," he said defensively.

"Of course not, dear."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "I am concerned about her. I do not know that I am the sort of man that she should be marrying."

"Then why do you continue to pursue a relationship with her? Because you know that you are exactly the sort of man that she should marry. You just have to admit it to yourself."

"It's a very large step," he muttered. After all his years of shutting everyone out, letting someone into his life, and as his wife to boot, was nearly beyond his comprehension. He had always seen himself living out the remainder of his life as a bachelor.

"It's nothing to be afraid of. You want her in your life. Think about it."

He replied sarcastically, "Once again, stellar advice. I must be going to class." He swept out of the library, not feeling at all satisfied at the outcome of his conversation. She had helped him see his true feelings, but he felt like she had not offered any real advice. Certainly nothing for his current dilemma of Aurelia leaving.

In the week following Aurelia's departure, Severus was more vindictive than usual with his students. Owing to the fact she had missed several weeks of work, she had not been able to meet him for dinner until Friday. Thankfully, she had the weekend off, and he spent most of it at her house. He thought that she did seem to be more like herself now that she had returned to her normal life. Unfortunately, he felt less like himself without seeing her on a daily basis.

The following Wednesday, she invited him for dinner, declaring that she had finally caught up on everything that had transpired in her absence. He hoped that meant they would be able to spend more time together, though he knew that he still had obligations at the school. He hoped that she could come see him more often. Just having her in his office as he graded papers was enough.

When he arrived at her house, she was in the middle of preparing dinner, and he offered to help, ignoring her protestations that she didn't need any. While they ate, she talked about how good it was to be back at work and get back into the normal routine. He noticed that she wasn't really eating much of her meal. "Is something bothering you?"

She pushed her potatoes around a few seconds more. "There's something I have to tell you."

Fearing the worst, he set down his fork and balled his hands around his napkin. "What might that be?" he tried to ask in a neutral tone of voice, even though he was inwardly terrified that she was going to tell him that they should just be friends. After all, he had performed so miserably in bed that they had not had sex since that first night.

"Something's happened, something quite unexpected."

He wanted to say something, anything. He wanted to reach across the table and shake her, demanding that she tell him whatever she was keeping from him. Had she met someone else? Someone better than him? He knew that he was not Britain's most eligible bachelor. He sat there.

She looked up and met his eyes. "I'm pregnant."

These were the last two words that he was expecting to hear, and the blood drained from his face. "What? Are you sure?"

"I've been through this before, and I'm a Healer, of course I'm sure."

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 13

The words rang in his ears. 'I'm pregnant.' Not at all what he had expected her to say. He had a sudden, sickening thought. She had been quite adamant about making love to him that one night, but afterwards, she had not, respecting his desire to wait. What if there had been a reason behind her urgency. "Is it mine?"

She was shocked. "Who else's would it be?"

"What about Malfoy? You said that he used sex as a tool to gain your cooperation."

"I said that he tried to bribe me with the promise of sex and the various benefits which might result from that sort of relationship. He never did anything to me," she replied adamantly.

"Are you sure? You were quite confused when I rescued you."

She threw down her napkin and stood up. "How dare you? I know that you aren't particularly fond of children, but I had hoped for a better reaction than this. I never expected you to accuse me of cheating on you or using you like that."

"I wasn't. I just wanted to make sure that he hadn't done anything to you." He realized that he had just managed to make a difficult situation immeasurably worse.

Crossing her arms defensively, she replied, "Well, he didn't. And this is most definitely your child."

Running his fingers through his hair, he tried to think. "But how could this happen? You are a Healer. Surely you would have used contraception."

"Oh, so it's up to me. The great Potions Master has no culpability?" she asked sarcastically.

He retorted, "You were the one who planned to seduce me. I had no control..."

"Men! It's always the woman's responsibility. And how exactly was I supposed to dabble in contraceptive potions while I was being held captive?" She was raising her voice in anger now, unable to control the flood of emotions. "And, I *planned* to seduce you?"

"Then why did you insist on having sex with me?" He found his tone instinctively matching hers.

"Because I love you. I wanted to share something special with you. But maybe that was a mistake." She turned from him and ran upstairs.

He stood in shock until he heard her bedroom door slam shut. How could she say that she loved him and then treat him the way she just had? Storming upstairs, he pounded on her door. "Let me in!" he demanded. When she didn't respond, he tried the doorknob, but found that it would not turn. Slamming his palm against the wood, he said, "Aurelia! Let me in this instant."

The only sound he heard coming from her room was her sobbing. Deciding that he did not want to deal with her in this emotional, irrational state, he turned on his heel and left.

By the time he had returned to the castle, he realized that he needed to talk to someone about this, and Eileen was the only person available to him. Since he knew the library would have closed long ago, he went straight to her quarters and began rapping loudly on the door.

"Severus? What in Merlin's name?" she asked as he pushed by her.

"I've made a horrible mess, Mother."

"What did you do?" she asked as she watched him pace.

"Aurelia's pregnant."

She smiled broadly. "I think that's wonderful news, and I would hardly call that a horrible mess." She paused momentarily. "Unless it's not yours."

"She insists it's mine." He still wasn't completely sure that he believed that.

"Then how did you make a horrible mess?" she asked, clearly confused. "This should be a joyous time."

"I handled the announcement rather poorly. As you know, I do not care for small children. That was one advantage of dating her. She already has children, and ones that are school age."

"How poorly did you handle the news?"

He flopped into the chair. "Do you have anything to drink?"

She poured him a glass of wine. "What did you do?"

After gulping down the first glass, he held it back out for a refill. "What didn't I do? First, I suggested that the child might be Malfoy's. Then we argued about whose responsibility contraception was. Everything I said made the situation worse."

"You do realize that you're going to have to apologize?"

He was halfway through his second glass and had taken the bottle from her. "I tried that. She wouldn't listen. She locked herself in her room and was crying." That had made him very uncomfortable, and a part of him had been relieved that she had not let him in.

Taking the bottle away from him, she placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Go back tomorrow and try again after you both have had time to reflect."

"I can reflect on the fact that she thinks this is wonderful news and that I should be overjoyed," he said dryly.

"You should be overjoyed. Children are a wonderful gift."

He snorted derisively. "The last thing the world needs is another Snape. I vowed the line would die with me."

"Honestly, Severus. That was the vow of a teenager angry with his father. It's been over twenty years since then. Surely in all that time, you at some point considered someday changing your mind."

"I don't have the patience for an infant or a toddler. Children...sometimes...become marginally interesting as they reach school age."

"Those don't sound like very good reasons."

"They are good enough for me," he snapped. "Haven't I ruined enough lives already? Do you really want me to ruin more?"

"Sleep on it, dear. Then discuss it rationally with her tomorrow. You may change your mind."

"Not bloody likely with the way she's acting," he muttered. He finished off his wine and rose slightly unsteadily to his feet. "I'm going to bed." It took a moment for the room to stop spinning and the door to settle still.

Aurelia heard her front door slam shut and pounded her fists against the bed. She knew that Severus was a difficult man, but she had never expected him to be so cruel as to accuse her of bearing Malfoy's child, much less foist it on him. That was not how she had expected him to react. She had expected shock, even perhaps the contraception argument...neither one of them had been thinking about the consequences of their actions...but she had hoped he would have been man enough to accept responsibility for those actions.

To make it worse, he hadn't even really tried to talk to her. He had only knocked once on the door and then stormed off into the night. This was precisely what Marcus had tried to warn her against. Of course, by the time she'd had that discussion with Marcus, it was far too late anyway; she had already given herself to Severus, body and soul.

Needing to speak with someone, she went downstairs to the Floo and asked Michelle to come over. By the time her friend arrived, the kettle was on in the kitchen, and she was clearing the plates from dinner.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I've ruined it all." Over tea, Aurelia recapped her evening with Severus. "I don't know what to do now," she moaned when she finished, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin.

"I don't know that there's anything more that you can do. It's up to him, isn't it?"

Aurelia turned the teacup in her hand. "It is, but I just wonder if I couldn't have handled it better. I think my delivery of the news was lacking, since he was starting to get worked up before I even told him."

Michelle moved around the table and wrapped her arm around her friend. "Well, maybe he'll come back tomorrow, or you can send him an owl asking him to come by."

"Do you think he would?" Aurelia asked hopefully.

"I'm sure he was just shocked today. Give him some time. He loves you, so I'm sure he'll feel differently once he's had time to get over the surprise."

"I'm not so sure. He's not really fond of children."

"But he teaches? And you said he's good with the girls."

"Not that we'd talked about it, but I really have the impression he doesn't like young children."

"I'm sure he'll feel differently when it's his."

"I hope so. I don't want to do this by myself." Severus had slowly worked his way into her heart, and she wanted him in her life.

"He loves you. I'm sure he wouldn't desert you like that."

Feeling somewhat better, Aurelia decided she might as well try to get some rest.

The following morning, she went down to the cellar to put the finishing touches on the Wolfsbane Potion. Remus would be coming by later that morning to pick up his doses for the week. It didn't take long to finish the preparation, and she soon had the elixir bottled and packed into a case.

When Remus rang her bell, she was lying in the living room, taking a short nap while she waited. Answering the door, she said, "I've got it all ready. I think there are some serious improvements to this version."

"Are you all right? You look tired." He reached out to place his hand gently on her arm.

"I'm fine. It was a late night last night." She knew she sounded tired and hoped that he wouldn't ask any more questions.

"Oh? Are you sure it wasn't something else? Perhaps to do with Severus?"

"Why would you think that?" she asked suspiciously. While she appreciated his concern, she really didn't want to talk about last night again.

"I saw him stalking across the grounds rather early last night. I wouldn't have expected him to return till much later."

"Oh." She realized that he suspected something, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to confide in him about this. She valued Remus's friendship, and there was the small chance that he would talk to Severus. "We had a bit of an argument last night." After she spoke, she started to wonder how Severus would feel about her involving Remus in this very personal issue.

"Anything I can help with?" he asked gently. "Why don't I put the kettle on, and we can talk about it?"

He had such a soothing presence that she didn't feel she could deny him, and she soon found herself telling him about her predicament over tea. He offered his congratulations when she told him that she was pregnant, and then he listened intently as she continued explaining what was upsetting her.

When she finished, he said, "I can see how that would upset him. Would you like me to try to talk to him?"

"I appreciate the offer, but I think that he should be given the opportunity to come to me first. He might resent you getting involved." There was no 'might' about it; he definitely would resent her involving Remus.

He chuckled softly. "That he would. Though, if he continues to act this foolishly, I'll be more than happy to speak with him."

"Thanks, Remus. I think that perhaps he just needs some time. I know the news was shocking to me; I can only imagine how it must have been for him. After all, it's not something either of us had planned. It just sort of happened."

Wrapping his arm around her, he gave her a reassuring squeeze. "That does happen from time to time. You wouldn't be the first couple."

"I know. I just feel really stupid about it since we both work so closely with potions. And neither of us are children. One of us should have known better and done something about it."

"Everyone makes mistakes, even Severus. Though, I doubt he'd admit it."

She laughed a bit ruefully at his joke. "Thanks, Remus."

"I'm glad if I've helped. Now, if you don't mind, I'm meeting Kalliope for lunch in Diagon Alley."

"Not at all. Your potion is in the case by the door. See you Friday?"

"I'll be here." He gave her a friendly hug and a peck on the cheek. "Let me know if I can do anything to help. Severus may act like he can't stand me, but we have reached a level of professional respect."

"I will. Thank you for everything." Knowing there was one more person on her side made her feel somewhat better, and she didn't feel quite so badly about spending the afternoon alone.

Severus paced his quarters. He knew that he had to talk to Aurelia again, but he wasn't sure what to say. The last thing he wanted was to be a father. It was the one job that he felt most ill-suited for. There was far too much responsibility involved in raising a child. He would have to talk with her and convince her that this was not something they were ready for. After all, they hadn't even discussed marriage yet. She was reasonable and every bit as set in her life as he was in his. Surely she would understand what he was saying.

It was almost mid-day when he arrived at her house. Nervously, he knocked on the door. When she answered, he asked, "May I come in?"

She stepped aside. "Of course."

He noticed that she seemed a bit tentative and led her into the living room. "About last night, I apologize for my reaction. You caught me off guard."

She smiled weakly. "I know. I could have done a better job of breaking the news to you. I should have just told you rather than scaring you like I did."

"You didn't scare me," he said defensively.

She slid across the sofa to get closer to him. "Well, I at least shocked you. I'm sorry about that. I know that what we did was a monumental mistake..."

"Oh, was it?" He stood up and moved away from her. "Is that what you think sleeping with me was? A monumental mistake?"

"No, it most certainly was not. I was referring to not using contraception."

"Were you? I know how disappointed you were by my performance," he said snidely.

"Is that what you think?" Now she was becoming irritated by his behavior.

"Then why else haven't you been with me since that night? You obviously find me an inadequate partner." Why else hadn't she pursued him?

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, for Merlin's sake. I most certainly do not. You were the one who wanted to wait. Remember? I was only doing what you wanted. You seem to feel that I am some frail creature. Well, I'm not."

A part of him realized that this conversation was going much the same as the one the previous night, but his emotions overruled his logic. "I have seen first hand what that sort of abuse does to a person. I knew you needed time to heal. I was very concerned about you. I didn't want to hurt you."

"But you did." She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes.

"That was not my intent." Now that they were no longer yelling at each other, he decided this was the best time to discuss their course of action. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I do love you, you know that?"

She leaned against him. "I do."

He sighed, knowing that what he had to say would not improve with time. "I just don't know that I'm ready for this. It's a very large step."

She pulled away. "What are you saying?"

"It's still early. You could terminate the pregnancy."

She looked aghast. "Are you serious? You would ask me to take a life?"

"It's not yet a viable life," he argued.

"Not yet. But it will be. You're asking me to kill our child? Is that how little you value our relationship?"

This was not going at all the way he had planned. "You are very special to me, but I am not the sort of person who should ever be a father."

"Then you should have thought of that before we had sex."

"Had you planned on having more children?" he asked, suddenly suspicious.

"I hadn't ruled it out, but I wasn't planning on it either."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" He began to wonder if she had used him. Was she trying to trap him into marriage?

She stiffened. "If you're going to act this childishly, you can just leave."

He could tell that his last comment had hurt her deeply, that he had obviously said precisely the wrong thing again. "Aurelia..."

"No! I'm serious. Just go. I don't want to deal with you when you're acting like this." She turned her back on him.

He reached out for her, but she pulled away. Once again, he had made a complete mess of the situation. He wasn't sure how to regroup, but further conversation today was not likely to yield anything productive. She was being far too emotional to make the rational decision.

Knowing this time that he would get no useful advice from his mother, he went straight to his quarters when he returned to Hogwarts. Cracking open the bottle of whisky he had purchased on the way, he took a slug straight from the bottle. When one intended to get drunk, there was no point in bothering with a glass.

Sunday afternoon, Aurelia was trying to keep herself busy. Unfortunately, she really didn't have much of anything to do. The Wolfsbane Potion for the coming week had already been prepared, and she didn't have any other research projects just now. She had planned on spending the day with Severus, but that didn't seem likely anymore. Protectively rubbing her stomach, she still couldn't believe that he had suggested an abortion. She knew that he could be cold and callous, but she had seen that he had a softer side too.

The warning alarms that someone unknown was approaching her house disturbed her from her dusting. Gripping her wand tightly, she carefully crept up to the door. Looking through the peephole, she was quite surprised to see Irma Pince.

Waiting a few seconds after Irma rang the bell, Aurelia opened the door. "Irma. This is an unexpected visit. What brings you here?"

"Severus. May I come in?"

Aurelia looked at Irma curiously for a few seconds. The librarian was the last person she had expected to come talk to her about Severus. "Oh, sorry. Of course. Please, do come in. Can I get you some tea?"

"Please," Irma replied as she was led into the living room.

Aurelia summoned the tea service from the kitchen. "If you don't mind me asking, why are you here to talk to me about Severus?"

Irma smiled at her sadly. "Because I care about him, just as you do. Well, not quite like you do, but we are probably the only two people alive who truly love him."

Aurelia was confused. What Irma was saying made no sense. She was old enough to be Severus's... "What are you trying to say?" she asked cautiously.

"Eighteen years ago, Severus realized that anyone close to him would be in grave danger, especially if Voldemort learned he had changed sides. I was the only one close to him. So he hid me away, with Albus Dumbledore's help. I went from being Eileen Snape to Irma Pince. A few months ago, he removed the spell that had kept me hidden all these years... As you've no doubt begun to guess, I am his mother."

"But why didn't he tell me?" They were close enough that he should have told her his mother was still alive.

Eileen reached over and patted Aurelia's knee. "Come now, dear, you know Severus well enough to know the answer to that question. He is a very private person. Not to mention the fact that I have chosen to keep my real identity secret while I try to determine how this should affect the rest of my life."

"Then why are you telling me this now?" She still couldn't make sense of any of this. It all seemed very far-fetched, but she had learned that Severus was a man of many secrets, so it was at the same time all too believable.

"Because I love Severus, and I know him better than anyone else. He told me that you are expecting, and I've seen how much that scares him."

"So he came to you for advice?" Aurelia asked quietly, wondering if she had approved of the idea of an abortion, too.

"What happened yesterday? I assume it went poorly from how he was behaving this morning, but I don't know the details."

Aurelia summarized how Severus had reacted to the news of her pregnancy and how poorly his apology had gone.

Eileen wrapped Aurelia in a comforting embrace as the younger woman broke down into tears. "Let me talk to him, and then come visit him in a few hours. I'll talk some sense into him."

Wiping her tears on her sleeve, Aurelia asked. "Do you think you really can? I mean, I know this wasn't planned, but I love him, and I want him to be a part of our lives."

"I think that I can. Now, don't you worry. I won't let him abandon my grandchild. He was terribly upset when you decided to return home, so I do know how much he cares about you."

"He was? Then why didn't he say anything?"

"Because he's Severus, dear. He doesn't like to tell anyone anything. Now, take a couple of hours, and think about what you want to say to him. I won't tell him you're coming."

Severus shoved his food around his plate, lost in thought. He knew he needed to talk to Aurelia again, but the last time he had tried, he had made the situation even worse. Now, it was so bad that he wasn't sure that it could be salvaged.

Remus put down his fork. "Is something bothering you?"

"No," Severus snapped.

"I was picking up my potion yesterday, and I noticed that something was bothering Aurelia, too. If the two of you are having a disagreement about something, perhaps I could help."

"I don't need your help," Severus growled.

"Perhaps 'help' wasn't the right word. I just thought you might appreciate having someone to confide in. I know how helpful it can be."

Slamming his fork down, he said through clenched teeth, "For one who purports to be intelligent, you are incredibly obtuse. I do not wish to discuss my personal life with you."

"Aurelia told me about the predicament the two of you are in. I thought that perhaps I could help you understand how she feels."

"Is that how it is? She can tell you her innermost feelings?" he said bitterly.

When Severus stood, so did Remus, blocking the Potions master's departure. "Severus, she was very upset and needed someone to talk to. I just happened to be there. If you would give her the chance, I'm sure she would talk to you, too."

"Quit meddling in my life, Lupin," Severus said in a low voice before pulling away and storming out of the Great Hall.

Severus was doing what relaxed him most when he was upset; he was in his lab working on potions research. He knew he had a stack of assignments to grade, but he was not in the mood. Brewing complex, potentially dangerous potions required his full attention and would keep his mind off how he had ruined everything with Aurelia.

The door to his lab flew open, causing him to add too much dragon's blood to the small cauldron in front of him, resulting in a bang and a puff of black smoke. He opened his mouth to scold whoever had disturbed him, but Eileen cut him off.

"Severus Snape! What in Merlin's name *were* you thinking?" Before he could reply, she continued, "How dare you suggest she have an abortion! I raised you better than that."

"I told you, I have no interest in being a father. I was not consulted on this. I was trying to assert my rights," he said defensively.

"No. You were being childish. Thinking only of yourself. You showed no concern for Aurelia's feelings. When you are in a relationship, there has to be give and take."

"So what was I supposed to do? Dance for joy?" he asked sarcastically.

She moderated her tone. "What you should have done was calmly discuss the situation with her. Severus, I know that it was a life altering moment." She sighed. "I've experienced that same moment."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "What do you mean?"

"You were unplanned. It was quite a surprise to your father and me to learn that I was pregnant with you."

"Let me guess, he reacted much the same way that I did? He then married you out of a sense of duty and tormented me, making my life a living hell. Not to mention the resentment he showed you. Further proof that my request was the proper one."

"Severus, listen to me. You love Aurelia, and she loves you. Love is a very precious thing, and you are throwing it away. That is the difference between you and your father: he never truly loved me. Are you really willing to walk away from love?"

He closed his eyes as he tried to shut out her words. The fact that he loved Aurelia was the reason why he had reacted so harshly to the news she was pregnant. He wanted her to himself. Then, he had suddenly been told that he would have to share her with a baby. "No. But I don't know what to do now."

She walked over and put her hand on his shoulder. "Put down your potions, and think of the young woman who loves you. You have made room for her in your life. And you have accepted her daughters. Would it really be so hard to let one more in? Especially a child conceived by two people who love each other. You together with her? Think about it. I'll be in the library if you want to talk more later."

After she left, he found he was unable to concentrate on his work anymore, so he gave up and retired to his quarters. Once there, he paced, trying to sort through his feelings. First the werewolf and now his mother were trying to pressure him into a course of action he did not want to follow. His life had changed so much in the last year, but this was one step that he wasn't sure he was ready to take. He finally settled in the chair before the fire and became lost in his thoughts.

A timid knock at his door disturbed him. Wondering who it was this time, he quickly crossed the room and opened the door. "Aurelia?"

She said softly, "We need to talk. And I mean really talk. No yelling at each other."

Moving aside, he waved her into the room. "Tea?" he offered.

"No, thank you." Taking a seat on his sofa, she said. "I think we should just start over."

Sitting next to her, he asked, "Start over?"

"Pretend that I haven't told you anything yet. Let's see if I can do a better job this time around." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, she had a broad smile on her face. "I have some wonderful and unexpected news. I'm pregnant."

"This is ridiculous. I already know that."

Reaching over, she picked up his hand and pleaded, "Please, Severus. Just play along."

He sighed. "Fine. Are you sure?"

She giggled at the lack of emotion in his question. "I am. I know that we hadn't planned on this happening, and we probably should have been more careful, but I wanted you so badly that I wasn't thinking clearly." Sliding across the sofa, she wrapped her arms around him. "I'm sorry it happened this way. But I'm not sorry it happened."

Now that he was rationally listening to her words, he found that it really was working better. "It was not solely your fault. I should have done my part to make sure we were safe." She merely held him, not saying anything, and he stroked her hair. "What do we do now?" he asked softly.

"I want you to be a part of our lives. I believe a child should have a father."

"I don't know that I am very promising father material," he replied honestly. This was definitely going much better than their other two conversations.

She laughed softly. "No first time parent is perfect. Probably not the second time or the third, either, for that matter. But it's not like you would be doing this alone. ~~do~~ have a little bit of experience, you know."

He smiled at her remark. "Yes, I know that. I just... I had a very unpleasant childhood and do not have much of an example to draw upon."

"I think we could handle it just fine. You're a quick study."

"I suppose we would have to get married."

She pulled away from him, a look of shock on her face. "I imagine that has to be the least enthusiastic and romantic marriage proposal in the history of mankind," she said sarcastically.

He realized that he had been thinking aloud. "I didn't mean it like that."

Leaning forward, she silenced him with a kiss. "It's all right." She was smiling at him warmly. "That is exactly what I have come to expect from you. I don't need an elaborate proposal or anything like that. I just need to know that you love me and want to be with me."

Pulling her into his lap, he replied, "I do. And I suppose that I do have time to get used to the idea of being a father."

Placing her arms on his shoulders, she said, "A whole nine months."

"I guess we have a lot to talk about now, don't we? Wedding arrangements, living arrangements, telling the girls."

"We do, but I think that can wait a little while." She leaned forward and kissed him deeply.

"What are you doing?" Not that he really minded being kissed by her.

"Making up with you." She kissed him again, running her hand down his chest and unbuttoning his shirt.

Returning her kiss, he lowered her to the sofa. The idea of experiencing 'make-up sex' excited him. Breaking the kiss, he nibbled at her neck while he fumbled with the buttons on the front of her robe. Her hands caressed his bare chest, and he momentarily wondered how she had unbuttoned his shirt so quickly, since he still had a great deal of trouble with her buttons.

Finally, he had the front of her robes unbuttoned. Pushing her bra out of the way, he teased her nipple with his tongue, pleased when she moaned his name. He stopped and gasped when he felt her hand wrapped around his erection. Somehow she had also gotten his trousers unbuttoned.

Pushing her skirt up, he was surprised to notice that she wasn't wearing any knickers. She smiled mischievously at him, and he captured her mouth in a penetrating kiss. Slipping his fingers inside her, he teased her briefly. When he tried to remove his hand, she gripped his wrist tightly.

"Not yet," she whispered huskily. Holding his hand in place, she whispered instructions on further ways to please her.

A part of him felt inadequate that she was telling him what to do, but her moans of pleasure quickly allayed those feelings. He wanted to penetrate her, but she was still denying him release.

Finally, she panted, "Take me!"

He plunged into her, feeling relief. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him deeper in. He was quite surprised to feel her clenching him tightly and calling out in climax before he did; he hadn't thought she would be so close yet. Moving more quickly, he brought himself to climax too.

She laced her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer for a kiss. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Thank you," he replied before shifting so that he was next to her on the sofa.

She snuggled against him, draping her arm and her leg over him. "I really do love you."

"And I love you, too." He just reveled in the feel of her for a few moments. "When did you want to get married?"

"Sooner is better, but I know that you can't get any time off until the Easter holidays. We could get married end of February, but postpone our honeymoon until April."

"Why so late?" When she had said 'sooner', he had thought within the next few weeks, not the end of next month.

"That would let us arrange a place for the wedding and reception, and give people some warning so they could be there."

He stiffened. A part of him had thought they would elope with the minimum amount of fuss. "People?"

"Helen, Julia, Michelle and her family, Marcus, Remus, Kalliope, Adrian, your mother, anyone else you wanted to invite." She nuzzled against him and kissed his neck. "It would be a simple ceremony and reception, nothing elaborate. We could keep it quiet. Though, people might notice."

"Notice what?"

"If I was living here, silly," she said playfully.

He realized that he had not considered living arrangements. "You would move here?"

"I'm sure that you could get Adrian to arrange a Floo connection from here to my office. Did you not want me to move here?"

He held her tightly. "Of course I want you to move here. I never wanted you to leave. I'm sure we can make the necessary... arrangements." The fact that she wanted to move in with him, made him ecstatic. This was a very pleasant turn of events.

A/N: As always, my undying gratitude goes to my loyal beta readers, nota and Zen Lady, who keep me straight and listen to my crazy ideas. Also, thanks to all who have read and left reviews. Your kind words mean a great deal to me.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 14

Aurelia forced herself to sit still. She was incredibly nervous about talking to her daughters. She knew that this would be a huge shock to them. It had been a huge shock to her.

Not surprisingly, Helen was the first to arrive. She hurried across the room and hugged Aurelia. "Good to see you, Mum."

Aurelia hugged her tightly. "You, too, dear."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, don't worry, dear. Nothing's wrong. Let's just wait for your sister before I tell you why I'm here." While they were waiting, Aurelia asked Helen about her classes, even though it had not been very long since they had last spoken.

When Julia entered Snape's office, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Aurelia replied nervously.

"Mum, something's bothering you."

Sitting down on the small sofa, she motioned the girls to sit on either side of her. "Severus and I have decided to get married." She had tried to determine the best way to break the news, but had not found any one way that she thought was likely to go better than any other.

Helen smiled and hugged her. Julia had a somewhat surprised look on her face. "When?"

"End of February."

"That's a little soon, isn't it?" Julia asked suspiciously.

"I know it seems that way... but as you get older, you also become more confident in your emotions. The two of us love each other, and we are good for each other. I know it seems like we are rushing into this..." She knew that she was repeating herself, but she had a tendency to do that when she was nervous. Wrapping her arms around the girls, she hugged them to her, trying to find the strength to tell the whole truth.

"Mum?" Helen asked in a strained voice as she tried to breathe.

Aurelia stood up and scooted Helen over so that she could look at both of them at the same time. "There is a reason for the wedding coming so soon." She paused, knowing that she had set a very bad example. Thankfully, the two of them were old enough and level-headed enough to understand what she was about to tell them. At least she hoped so. "The two of us were careless, and I'm pregnant." Her heart sank. She could not pretend to be surprised by the stunned silence that met this announcement.

"Are you serious?" Julia finally asked.

"I am. I know that what we did sets a very bad example. But I think you can see why we have set the wedding so soon."

Julia still looked shocked. Helen finally leaned over and hugged her mother. "Are you really going to have a baby?"

"Yes, I am."

"I can't believe you did that. Dad has only been gone a year, and you're already replacing him?" Julia was nearly shouting now.

Aurelia hadn't expected her announcement to be met with anger. "I am not replacing your father. No one could ever replace him..."

"But here you are, getting married, having a baby, starting a new family. It's disgusting."

She took a deep, calming breath. "Julia, please. None of this changes the way I feel about your father. I still miss him, and I wish with all my heart that he were here with all of us, but he's not. He's gone. And I know for a fact that he would want me to find happiness again." She was suddenly having a hard time holding back the tears. Julia's words cut like a knife.

"You're lying," Julia shouted defiantly as she sprang to her feet.

"Julia, please. You are being unreasonable." She had never thought it would be this difficult. Helen had nuzzled herself under her mother's arm.

"You and Professor Snape..." Julia shuddered.

"You had no problems with the two of us being friends, with him staying over the holidays."

"That was different. But now, with what you did... You're screwing my professor! What are people going to say?" Julia was now shouting.

Aurelia tried not to let the words sting, but they did. "That is why the wedding is happening as soon as it is," she explained. "I know I made a mistake, but I can't take it back. What's done is done. This fall, you will have a brother or sister, but that won't ever change how I feel about either of you." She gave Helen a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be living here, but I will keep my distance. You won't see me any more often than you do now, except perhaps on weekends."

"How is it going to look for you to be married to one of my professors? That's going to be too weird, mother. Everyone's going to know..."

"Only if you tell them. Neither of us is planning on making a big deal about the wedding. I know how important privacy is to both of you. I can imagine how odd it would be to have your step-father teaching you..."

"No. You have no idea." Julia turned on her heel and slammed the door on her way out.

"Well, I'm happy for you, Mum," Helen said after a few moments of silence.

Aurelia hugged her younger daughter tightly, pleased to at least have her support. "Thank you, darling. I'll try to talk to her again later, once she's had time to calm down. Now, I think you should head up to dinner. And remember, you are not to tell anyone."

"I know. I won't. I love you."

"I love you, too." Aurelia gave Helen a quick kiss and sent her on her way.

Severus joined her a few moments later. "I presume from the slamming of the door that it did not go well."

She sighed. "No. Julia was quite put out. Understandably so. I think she just needs some time to accept what has happened."

"And Helen?" he asked as he sat beside her.

She leaned against him. "She seemed happy about the news. I think she's excited about the idea of being a big sister, which is good. Julia, well, she's sixteen. There's not much more explanation required." She took comfort in his presence and the touch, the feel of him. "I love you."

He wrapped his arm around her and finally replied, "I love you, too."

Severus had given his testimony the day before. He had hoped that it would be strong enough that there would be no need for Aurelia to appear before the Wizengamot, too. Unfortunately, they had not seen things as he had, and they were still insisting that she testify.

He hurried the fourth years out of class as soon as the bell rang, not that they needed much encouragement. As he was leaving his office, he ran into Adrian.

"Do you think you'll be back for your afternoon class, then?" Adrian asked as he fell into step next to Severus.

"I don't know, though, I think it is doubtful."

"Take your time. I know this will be a difficult day for her. I've always found this sort of trial horrible for making the victim relive the crime. Send an owl if you won't be back for class tomorrow."

"I will be back tomorrow," Severus said firmly.

Adrian reached out and took hold of Severus's arm. "If she needs you to be there for her, then be there. The school can live without you for a few days."

"I have obligations here," he protested.

"You have obligations to her, too. Don't turn your back on those obligations and risk losing her."

He looked into the older man's eyes and could see sorrow that the headmaster was very much trying to hide.

"Severus, listen to me. Be there for her. She will need you."

Severus found that he could not argue with the look he was being given. The moment that Adrian released him, he hurried back toward the gate. Once clear of the Hogwarts boundary, he landed and Disapparated to Aurelia's house.

As soon as she opened the door, he could see that she didn't look well. "Aurelia?"

She threw herself against his chest, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked. Slowly he placed his hands on her back. He was still somewhat uncomfortable with the amount of physical contact she displayed, especially the random nature of this contact, though he was slowly growing accustomed to it.

"No. But I don't have a choice, do I?"

"I'm afraid not. At least it will all be over soon."

Pulling away, she nodded and wiped her face dry. "I know. I just don't know if I can look at him."

They traveled to the Ministry in silence. As he led her to the lower level courtroom, she gripped his hand tighter. He stopped her outside the door. "Concentrate on the Interrogator. Don't pay any attention to Malfoy. He will attempt to intimidate you. Answer the questions simply, and it will be over sooner. Do not concentrate on any details that you don't have to." She had looked down at her feet, and he lifted her chin, so that she was looking at him. "You can do this. I know you can. As soon as it's over, I'll be here for you." Looking at the fear in her eyes, he leaned down and gently brushed her lips.

When they entered the courtroom, he took a seat in the gallery as she was led to the witness stand. He sat in the back of the room, not wanting to draw any more attention than necessary. He was surprised at how compassionate the Interrogator was. But even with his gentle questioning, Severus could see how difficult testifying was for Aurelia. He cringed as she explained the details of what had happened during her captivity. Much of it he had not yet heard, not having pressed her for details.

As she fought back the tears, he wanted nothing more than to whisk her out of the courtroom and take her somewhere safe. Unfortunately, that was not an option. He glanced over to Malfoy and could see the man's smug look. Even during his testimony yesterday, he had sensed that Malfoy was not acting like a man who expected to be sentenced to life in Azkaban. Knowing Malfoy, Severus would not be at all surprised if the man had worked out some sort of deal.

When Aurelia was finally excused, he slipped out of his seat and met her at the door. She nearly collapsed against him as he led her out of the courtroom. "Please. I want

to go home," she choked out in a very small voice.

He wrapped his arm protectively around her as he led her up to the Floo.

The Saturday after Aurelia testified, she and Severus were enjoying breakfast when the *Daily Prophet* arrived. "I can't believe this," Aurelia said and threw the paper to the table.

Severus picked it up and saw that the verdict had come down in Malfoy's trial. As he had suspected, the bastard had avoided a life sentence at Azkaban. Instead, he had been given probation and a rather stiff monetary fine, though Severus knew it was but a pittance to one of Malfoy's means.

"After all I said, after all the others said, all he gets is a slap on the wrist?" she said bitterly.

"Sadly, money can buy a lot of things," Severus replied as he reached across the table to take her hand in his.

"But... that. He was one of You-Know-Who's biggest backers. How could they just ignore that?" She tried hard not to think about what he had said about the wizarding community needing him. Could he really have convinced the Wizengamot of the same thing he had tried to convince her of? Unfortunately, she knew enough of the Ministry to realize now that his Galleons most definitely could have. After all, she had not brought herself to tell anyone that he had given the endowment to the Potions Ward. At least his money would finally be doing some good, and there was no chance that he could take credit for it. That was the one small pleasure she could still take.

"They don't forget that, but if they imprison him, they know they will lose his money." He knew it was a poor answer, but politicians were always prone to corruption. It had always surprised him that more of them were not Slytherin.

"Their lack of morals is disgusting. With enough victims testifying, he should have got more than that."

"Aurelia, there weren't many others," he said soberly.

"What do you mean? Surely others would have come forward to testify against him. If he has wronged them..."

"As I said, money can buy a great many things. For the right price, I'm sure others were convinced not to testify. Even though he was incarcerated, he would have accomplices who could ensure that people wouldn't testify."

"Then why didn't they approach me?"

"They were likely not instructed to as you had been his last victim. That, and you have been protected both here and at Hogwarts. Perhaps they did try, but were dissuaded by the wards." He truly didn't know why, but these were the best theories he had.

She shuddered at that thought. "I need to get some air," she said and rose from the table.

Not wanting her to be alone, he joined her for a walk.

Severus barged into Lupin's office. Remus immediately looked up from the paper he was grading. "What can I do for you, Severus?"

Severus stared at his colleague a moment. "You will be my best man on the twenty-first."

Remus set down the quill and removed his glasses. "Oh? Is that so?"

"What do you mean, 'is that so'?"

"You just don't tell someone he is your best man. You ask that someone."

Severus gritted his teeth. "Fine. Will you be my best man?" He felt like a fool asking this question. Lupin could have clearly said no; instead, he was just playing a game.

Remus leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

"Well?" Severus asked impatiently.

"I'm thinking," Remus replied simply.

"About what? You are attending the wedding. What more is there to think about?" This was one of the reasons he disliked Gryffindors on principle: they were exasperating. Albus and Minerva had been the same way.

"You see," Remus began contemplatively, "the best man is normally the groom's closest friend. Now, I'm not entirely sure that we have reached a level of friendship that would make it appropriate for me to be your best man."

Severus was aghast. Clearly, the werewolf wanted something; the question was: what? Not wanting to draw this out any further, he asked, "What is it you want of me before you will acquiesce?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Remus asked innocently.

It was all Severus could do to keep his temper in check. "Clearly, you want something from me. You have offered your friendship to me. I am accepting it and asking you to be my best man."

"In that case, you should apologize."

"Whatever for?" he asked sharply.

"I have apologized countless times for not being a better Prefect. I have even apologized for things that were not my fault that happened while we were students. You have not accepted those apologies nor apologized for things that you have done."

Finally, he was getting some answers. He knew that this would have to be a sincere apology. "When you last taught here, I was upset and humiliated by what happened the night Black was captured. It was not your fault that he escaped that night. And he was innocent of the murder he was imprisoned for in the first place. I should not have told the students the nature of your affliction that night." He paused, and once he realized that was not going to be enough, he choked out, "I'm sorry."

Remus waited a few seconds before a broad smile spread across his face. "Apology accepted. I would be honored to be your best man."

"Why do you have to make things so difficult," Severus muttered before leaving.

Aurelia had finished preparations for Remus's transformation and was resting in the living room, waiting for his arrival. She had forgotten how exhausting being pregnant could be. Severus had tried to insist that she allow Remus to transform at the castle. He had offered to watch over the werewolf, but she had insisted on having him at her house as usual. She had told him that she had all her notes and necessary antidotes there right at her fingertips in case anything went wrong, and that it would be too much trouble to move them all to Hogwarts. Grudgingly, he had admitted that this made perfect sense, and even though he didn't like it, he had allowed her to have her way. He had offered to stay with her, stopping short of insisting, but she would not hear of him wasting his time when he still had work to catch up on, having already spent quite a bit of time away from Hogwarts on her account.

When the bell rang, she quickly rose and answered the door. "Remus, good to see you."

He gave her an appraising look. "Are you all right?"

She smiled weakly. "I'm just tired. It's nothing unusual."

"There's still time for me to go back to the castle," he offered.

"Really, I'm fine. I was just taking a nap. Everything's ready downstairs."

He followed her down to the cellar and they talked for a few minutes until moonrise was imminent. Before she shut the door on him, he said, "Here's to hoping you've made some more improvements."

"I think maybe we have. I've made some more refinements on last month's changes, since we seemed to be moving in the right direction. Hopefully, this time you will remain more man than wolf."

"That would truly be a marvelous gift. Aurelia, I can never repay you for all that you've done."

"It's my job as a Healer. I'll check on you after the moon rises." After closing the door, she took a seat at her workbench and pulled out her notebook. The moon would be rising shortly.

Looking out the transom window, she stared at the darkening sky. In just a couple of days, she would be getting married, and she let herself get lost in that thought. It would be a small ceremony at the Three Broomsticks. Severus had decided not to invite anyone other than his mother, not that it had surprised Aurelia.

The sound of knocking from the storage room door returned her attention to the present. Cautiously, she approached the door and pulled back the viewing flap. She was quite surprised to see yellowish-brown eyes staring back at her.

"Aurelia," Remus said.

She could feel her heart racing in excitement. As he moved back from the door, she could see that he was more or less completely human. His fingernails had elongated, slightly resembling claws, and he was hairier than normal, but he was essentially human. "Remus?" she asked tentatively.

He grinned at her, baring larger than normal eye-teeth. "Yes. I think you've made a definite improvement."

"And there was no pain?" she asked hopefully.

"Minimal. Basically just my hands and feet. If you don't mind, I'd like to come out. I'd like to see the moon."

She thought about this for a moment. Severus would be completely against it, and if he ever found out, he would insist that she must have totally lost her mind, but she told herself that if Remus was able to speak rationally with her, the wolf inside the man must be completely contained. "Sure."

Unlocking the door, she tried not to look nervous, but she still gripped her wand tightly at her side.

When he emerged, he did so slowly, holding his arms wide to hug her. Perceiving no danger, she welcomed his embrace. "Thank you so very much. I cannot begin to tell you how much this means to me," he said.

She could tell that he was crying tears of joy. "I'm happy to have helped. Are you ready to go outside?"

"Most definitely," he beamed.

They sat outside on her back porch, saying nothing for a long time, just enjoying the night. It was cool, but not cold, and would in fact be considered unseasonably warm. They talked about the wedding, and how excited Aurelia was, for a little while. She was pleased to learn that Remus would be the best man, knowing that it would be good for Severus to have a male friend. After about twenty minutes, they fell silent again.

"I've dreamt of this all my life. Being able to sit outside and enjoy a full moon. Though, I can still smell all the scents of the night." He gripped the bench tightly as he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

"Next month, I'll see if I can refine it some more." She could tell that he still retained some wolfish qualities, that he was fighting an internal battle between his human and beastly sides, and it was in her nature to want to do more for him.

He took her hands in his. "This is good enough for now. You have enough work to do without spending your free time working on this potion. I don't want you tiring yourself out too much. I know how much time and effort you must have been putting into helping me."

"Really, it's..."

He cut her off. "Aurelia, I'm serious. You're positively exhausted. And you told me earlier that you tire more easily now. I'm safe. I'm myself. This is good enough. After the baby is born, you can start work on the potion again. Besides, some of the ingredients you are using might be toxic."

"I know my potions," she replied defensively.

He said softly, "I know you do. You've done more for me than anyone else has ever been able to do. I've talked to Severus, and he has agreed to brew the best version of the potion for me."

"You talked to Severus?" A part of her felt betrayed that he had gone behind her back, though, she understood the reason why.

"We're both very concerned about you." He brushed her cheek.

She wanted to argue that the two of them were meddling and that there was nothing to worry about, but she could tell that he thought he was doing this for the best. When she had been pregnant with the girls, Henry had likewise had to insist that she take it easy. "I do appreciate your concern."

"That's good. Now, as it is getting late, I think you should get some sleep. I'd like to sit out here a bit longer, and then I can move up to the spare bedroom if you don't mind."

She thought about this a few seconds, still not quite sure about leaving him alone. Finally, she said, "All right. Goodnight, then." Once she was upstairs, she found that she was too tired to change for bed and collapsed, still fully clothed.

The following morning, she woke under the covers. She couldn't remember crawling under them. She was just about to get up when she heard a soft knock on the door.

Remus cracked the door. "Aurelia? Are you awake?"

"Yes. Please, do come in."

He backed into the room, carrying a tray. "I thought you might like some breakfast."

She sat up and smiled at him. "You didn't have to do that." She thought that he looked quite a bit better after the transformation than he had in the past. Normally, he would not be moving about this early in the morning.

"It's the least I could do for you. I take it you slept well? I hope you don't mind, but I came in and tucked you in last night."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that."

"Well, I'm going to clean up, and then I should get back to the school. I don't need Severus griping about having people cover my whole day of classes. I'll see you Saturday at the wedding."

"All right. And, Remus, thanks again for breakfast."

"It's the very least I could do." He smiled warmly before leaving.

Saturday morning, Severus was a nervous wreck. He still couldn't believe that he was getting married in less than an hour. This was not a day that he had ever thought would come.

"Severus, you are going to wear a hole in the floor," said Remus.

"I just can't sit still. Is this a mistake?"

"Why would you think it's a mistake?"

"She could do so much better than me. She could find someone... more caring." *Less like me*, he added.

"I don't think she wants anyone but you. She's quite happy to be marrying you."

"Are you sure?" The rational part of his mind knew this was true, but the part of him that had grown up insecure from being bullied and ridiculed still found it hard to believe.

"Positive. She loves you. Don't ask me why, but she does."

Severus shot him a murderous glance, only dimly aware that he was joking. "That is a very good question."

"There are some things in life you should not question. Her love for you is one of them. She's good for you."

"Too good for me," Severus muttered.

"Don't start that again. Come on, have a glass of whisky. It'll calm your nerves a little."

"Are you advising me to get drunk before my wedding?" he asked suspiciously.

"No. I'm asking you to have one glass. It'll help. Really. You know, you really should try trusting me. I'm mostly harmless."

Severus kept his back to the other man. Right now, there were only two people in his life that he trusted unconditionally: Aurelia and his mother. He had to admit that Remus had been trying to make amends for what had happened back in their old school days ever since he had first returned to Hogwarts. Could he finally let bygones be bygones? "I'll take that drink." It was a small step, but that was how he did things.

Eileen and Michelle were helping Aurelia get ready. She had chosen to wear a pale blue dress.

"You look so lovely," Eileen said, wiping at the tears she was unable to hold back any longer. Wrapping her arms around Aurelia, she said, "I can't believe that my boy is getting married."

"It is wonderful, isn't it?" Aurelia replied. She was trying not to be nervous, but her morning sickness wasn't helping, either. She had already taken one potion to calm her stomach and knew that it would be several hours before she could take a second dose.

"Are you just about ready?" Michelle asked. "Everyone's here and the guys are downstairs already."

Aurelia nervously smoothed her dress again. "Yes, I'm ready."

The ceremony was brief and simple. Neither of them had wanted anything elaborate, Severus especially, though he had politely asked her if she was sure that the simple affair would be enough. She had explained to him that she had already had her large wedding and that to have something lavish attended by so few would be silly.

Adrian had filled in as father of the bride, escorting her to the front of the room. Before they began their walk, he had whispered to her, "You are the best thing that has ever happened to him."

The reception was also simple. Instead of a formal sit-down meal, they had decided to have a buffet that would allow people to mingle as they wished. It felt more like a garden party, aside from the fact that it was February and they were indoors.

Charlie came up to congratulate them. He had just resumed his teaching duties earlier in the week, finally recovered from his injury. Adrian had determined that as soon as Hagrid returned to England, the former Gamekeeper would be sent to remove the creature from the forest as it was far too dangerous and lurking far too close to the school grounds for comfort. And he was under no circumstances to adopt it as a pet.

Helen was positively joyful. She was like a ray of sunshine on the cold, gray afternoon, happily chatting with those in attendance, and most found her high spirits infectious.

Severus leaned over and whispered to Aurelia, "Times like this, I can hardly believe she was sorted to Slytherin."

Aurelia smiled. "I'm sure that you have learned not to trust her innocent nature. She's incredibly manipulative."

"As some of her classmates have learned, though many have not."

She chuckled at his comment, but the smile faded when she noticed Julia sitting sullenly in the corner. "I had hoped that Julia would come to accept this better."

"She was close to her father, wasn't she?" he asked softly.

Nodding, Aurelia replied, "Yes, the two of them were inseparable. He used to teach her Auror tricks during the holidays. I just don't like to see her acting like this."

"I can assure you that her behavior is quite typical for one her age. She doesn't hate you."

"I know. Now, let's turn to happier subjects. Like where we are going for our honeymoon."

He arched an eyebrow at this question. "I have told you, I leave that decision to your discretion."

He was saved from further discussion when Remus came up to them. "Are the two of you ready for your dance?"

"Dance," asked a startled Severus.

Aurelia looped her arm in his. "It is customary for the bride and groom to take the first dance." Turning her attention to Remus, she replied, "We're ready."

He began to wish that he had researched wedding customs, but it was too late for that now. Resigning himself to his fate, he wrapped his arm around her waist as the music started. She moved much closer to him than she had during their dance at the New Year's Ball, and he was growing very self-conscious. He was not fond of public displays of affection, and he considered this to be a very intimate moment.

About halfway through the song, others joined them. Remus and Kalliope were dancing together, as were Eileen and Adrian. He would have to ask her about that as the two of them were maintaining intense eye contact.

When the song ended, he tried to leave the dance floor, but Aurelia held her ground. "I'm getting more than one dance out of you tonight, my love," she said playfully.

After three songs, he was finally able to convince her that she should rest a little while before they left. When he went to get her some punch, he saw that Remus was still dancing with Kalliope, if that's what you wanted to call it. At least the two of them had moved toward the corner, and he made a mental note to discuss the unprofessional behavior with Remus on Monday.

When he returned, he saw that Aurelia was keeping a discreet eye on them. "I find it disgraceful," he said.

She smiled at him. "I think it's wonderful that he's found someone." She leaned over and nuzzled against him. "Jealous?" she teased.

"Not here," he replied quietly.

"Then perhaps it's time for us to make our exit," she replied before nipping at his earlobe.

He had thought she would not participate in that sort of undignified display, but he found that he didn't mind so much this time. "I think perhaps you are right."

After they said their farewells, they retired to her house.

He noticed a trunk by the door and arched an eyebrow at her.

She grinned mischievously at him. "Do you not want your wife to move in with you?"

"I most certainly do, only I hadn't expected it to happen so soon. So, tomorrow evening?"

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she reached up to kiss him. "Tomorrow evening, yes, but tonight, I'm all yours." As she kissed him, she pushed him toward the living room. "How does it feel to be a married man?"

He rubbed his thumb against the ring on his left hand. It was a very unfamiliar feeling. "Ask me again in the morning, Mrs. Snape," he replied as he pulled her onto the sofa and kissed her deeply.

A/N: As always, thanks to ZenLady and nota, my loyal beta readers. You keep me on track and let me know when I leave stuff out and catch some of my stupid mistakes. Also, thanks to my readers. I'm glad to know that so many of you are enjoying this story.

As you can probably guess, this part of the saga is winding down. At some point, I do have ideas to revisit this particular AU to see what the future holds.

Finally, this story is nominated for the Multifaceted Awards in Aphrodisia and Identity. I hope that you will consider voting for this story. Voting closes on 22 July.
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/main.htm>

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 15

Severus found it odd to wake up in his quarters with a woman...no, his wife. Touching the ring on his left hand, he still found it hard to believe. Looking at the woman snuggled against him, he was pleased that it was reality.

"Morning, husband," she said playfully.

"You aren't going to be formal like that, are you?" he asked sardonically.

She laughed softly. "No." After giving him a few kisses, she said, "I could stay here all day with you."

"I know, but unfortunately, we both have to go to work."

"Don't remind me. I can't wait until the Easter holidays."

He brushed her hair trying to untangle it. "Have you decided where we are going?"

Running her hands along his chest, she replied, "Ask me again on Friday. I have a few ideas."

"Such as?" He was not that type of person who enjoyed surprises and hoped that she would keep her word and tell him then rather than make a game of it.

Leaning over, she gave him a kiss before rising from bed. "You'll have to wait until Friday."

He joined her in the shower, and the amount of time they took left Aurelia little time to eat breakfast. She insisted she wasn't feeling up to anything more than tea and toast, but this bothered Severus. He insisted that she take a snack to eat later in the morning.

After she was gone, he finished getting dressed to go up to the Great Hall. As he reached for the door, he saw the glint of gold on his finger. The last thing he wanted was students gossiping about him. For a moment, he considered taking the ring off and leaving it here. He paused with his fingers on the ring and then realized he could disillusion it. That would be much better. With a quick flick of his wand, the ring became invisible. He could still feel its unfamiliar presence, but he wouldn't have to worry about the students noticing it.

This Monday was very much like any other Monday. He reiterated his mental note to not schedule first years for Monday morning Potions ever again. It just wasn't a good way for him to start the week. Thankfully, the afternoon was an improvement. He had the seventh years, and they were working on independent study projects.

Of the eight in his class, he thought that only two had the potential to have a career in Potions. Unfortunately, one of them was not only a Gryffindor, but also a Weasley. He scowled at the thought of her taking her brilliant mind and working for her brothers, and it made him shudder. Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes already gave him a headache, and it would only multiply if she applied her intelligence to their products. He would have to encourage her to a different career field.

That evening, he spent only a few minutes in the Great Hall, eager to have dinner with Aurelia.

She was waiting for him when he returned to his quarters and greeted him with a hug and a kiss. "I just got in."

"How was your day?"

"Nothing extraordinary. Are you ready to eat?"

"Your appetite's back?"

She took her seat. "I feel better as the day goes on. That is why they call *it* morning sickness," she replied sarcastically.

He chose to ignore her comment and noticed that she was eating mostly just the vegetables. He would speak with the house-elves and see that they tailored the meals to her tastes.

"Severus?" He looked up, and she continued, "Where's your ring?"

He looked down at his finger, cursing his carelessness for forgetting to remove the charm. Tapping his finger with his wand, the ring reappeared. When he looked up, he could see the hurt in Aurelia's expression.

She dropped her fork. "Are you ashamed of me?" she asked in a quavering voice.

He quickly reassured, "No, not at all."

"Yet you chose to hide your ring, hide the fact you are married to me." As she burst into tears, she leapt up from the table and ran from the room.

He threw his knife across the room. He had known it would only be a matter of time before they argued about something, though he had not expected it to happen on their second full day of marriage. Knowing that he had to do something, he left to find her. Hopefully, she was still in the castle, since she did not have a cloak.

After he had been searching for ten minutes, the Bloody Baron appeared before him. "Do you know where she is?" Snape asked.

The Baron nodded and floated down the corridor. Severus followed silently and was only partially surprised when the Baron led him to the library. Looking around, he didn't see either of them. The students that looked up were encouraged to look back at their books by the sharp glare he gave them. Swiftly moving through the library, he went to the Librarian's office. The door was closed most of the way, but he could hear Aurelia crying inside.

Deciding it wouldn't be appropriate for him to disturb them, he went back to his quarters. Once there, he threw himself into the chair by the fire and stared at the flames.

There was a knock on the door, and he rose to answer it after checking the clock on the mantle and noticing that an hour had passed. "Mother," he said quietly when he opened the door.

Eileen slipped through the door, but didn't say anything.

"I warned you that I would not make a good husband," he said as he flopped back into his chair.

Eileen sat across from him. "Why did you do it?"

"Which 'it'? Disillusion the ring or forget to remove the charm?"

"The first one."

He sighed. "I have been the victim of the students' gossip for far too long. The last thing they needed was more fuel for the fire."

"You aren't embarrassed about being married, are you?"

"Merlin, no. It was the happiest day of my life. I never meant to hurt her."

"Severus, she is spending a lot of time here, her presence cannot be hidden forever. And once your child is born, I daresay it will become impossible. Invite her to dinner, in the Great Hall, and let Adrian announce your marriage."

"Are you insane? Do you realize the amount of giggling I'll have to endure if that happens? Not to mention the embarrassment to her children?"

"You need to let her know that you love her more than anything else. More than even your reputation. Invite her. That doesn't mean she will accept. I know I talked to you about how pregnancy would affect her, and that she will be much more emotional due to her fluctuating hormones. You have to take that into account."

"Take it into account? I barely know how to act as it is. You can't just ask me to be more careful. I am who I am. She knew that when she married me."

Eileen reached over and put her hand on his knee. "I know that, but you need to realize that she needs you to be supportive. Julia is already against her, she needs your unconditional support."

"She didn't seem too bothered by it Saturday."

"It can happen quickly. It's still early in the pregnancy. It will get worse before it gets better."

"Wonderful," he replied sarcastically. "Plenty of opportunity for me to ruin our marriage."

"You won't be ruining it. Just... tread softly around her. And you should probably get used to apologizing."

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his chair. "Where is she now?"

"My quarters. I thought it would be more comfortable than my library office."

"Thank you."

"If you need to talk, my door is always open for you. Oh, you might want to take her a peace offering." She rose from her chair and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Be patient. Marriage takes a great deal of patience, and dealing with a pregnant woman takes even more."

"So I've noticed," he muttered as she left. Looking around he tried to determine what he could give as a peace offering. Noticing the quill on his desk, he transfigured it into a red rose. It would have to do.

Standing before his mother's door, he raised his hand to knock and froze. What would he do if she was still angry with him? What would he do if she told him to go away? Finally, he worked up the courage to knock. When given permission, he entered.

He saw Aurelia sitting on the sofa, tightly hugging a pillow to her chest. Slowly, he crossed the room. "Aurelia, I'm terribly sorry about earlier. I never meant to hurt you." He handed her the rose before sitting next to her. "The speed at which everything has happened has been hard on both of us and..." he paused before continuing, "I was selfish."

He watched her bow her head as she succumbed to a fresh round of tears. Dealing with crying women was one thing he had always dreaded. His mother had cried far too much during his childhood. His instinct was to run from the situation, but he knew that would only hurt her more. Placing his arm around her shoulder and pulling her to him, he said, "I love you." When she tried to pull away, he refused to let go. "I love you as I have never loved anyone. I made a mistake, and I'm sure it will not be my last." Thinking to what his mother had said, he added, "I would be honored if you joined me for dinner in the Great Hall tomorrow."

She looked up at him with her tear filled eyes. "Really? You want me to come to dinner in front of the whole school?"

He didn't really want her to, but he knew what she wanted to hear. "I do."

She collapsed against him and started crying again, though this time it was tears of joy. "I appreciate the offer, darling, but you don't have to do that."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

She reached down and picked up his left hand. "Don't hide it anymore."

"I won't." After a few seconds, he added, "Did you want to go back to our quarters? I could send for something to eat?"

"Eileen sent for something, but I would like to go back downstairs." As they walked back downstairs, she said, "I'm sorry I went off like that. My hormones are in flux."

"I know. I'll try to be more understanding."

"I guess I should warn you that I become very temperamental when I'm pregnant."

"I hadn't noticed," he said dryly.

She laughed softly and leaned against him. "Thank you."

After Aurelia had been at the castle a couple of weeks, she decided to invite the girls to Sunday tea. So as not to draw too much attention, she sent the letters by owl.

When Sunday afternoon arrived, she was waiting patiently. Severus had agreed to retire to his office and catch up on work. She was reasonably sure that Helen would come, but she wasn't sure about Julia. Even if Julia didn't show up today, she hoped that Julia would eventually start to attend.

Shortly after Helen arrived, Aurelia poured tea, and the two of them chatted about classes. Aurelia did ask about Julia, but Helen didn't have a lot of contact with her sister due to their being in different houses.

After an hour, Aurelia sent Helen on her way, not wanting to keep her from her friends too long.

For the next month, she kept the same ritual, sending an owl to Julia, inviting her to tea. In return she would receive a terse note declining the invitation. Each week, Aurelia held out hope that Julia would change her mind, and each week, Julia did not. Aurelia tried her best to hide her disappointment from Severus, but as time went on, she found it harder to do.

Severus noticed that Julia's continued shunning was upsetting her, but he had no idea how to solve the problem. After all, if Julia wouldn't confide in her mother, what chance did he have?

He was watching his second year's brewing a Calming Draught when he realized there was something he could do. He stopped behind Helen's cauldron and hissed, "See me after class." Her classmates looked at her oddly. It was rare that he asked someone from his house to stay after class.

Once everyone had filed out of the room, she approached his desk. "You wanted to see me, Professor?"

"Your mother is quite upset at Julia's continued refusal to come to tea on Sundays. Have you spoken with her about this?"

"No, Professor. I don't see much of her. I'll see if I can find her."

"That would be greatly appreciated. Dismissed." He watched her leave the room. Once he was sure she was gone, he made his own exit. Julia had the next period free, as did Helen, and she normally spent it in the library. He intended to use one of the shortcuts to beat her to the library and conceal himself in the stacks. He wanted to hear for himself what Julia had to say.

Helen entered the library and saw her sister sitting at a table with a stack of books. She slid into the chair across from Julia and said, "Do you have a minute?"

"I'm kind of busy," Julia replied, barely looking up from her studies.

Helen leaned forward. "Why don't you come to tea with Mum?"

"I don't have anything to say to her."

"She misses you."

"Oh, really? She abandoned us, Helen. She's starting a new family with a new man."

"She hasn't abandoned us. When we are together, it's just the two of us. We talk about school, Dad, what courses I should study next year, all kinds of stuff. We talk about you."

"Oh, yeah, about what a bad daughter I am, I'm sure."

"Julia, really, Mum misses you. Come to tea this Sunday."

"I'm busy. I have a project I'm working on."

"It's only an hour," Helen pleaded.

"I'm not going to play around that we are some sort of happy family. We aren't. Just because she's replaced Dad doesn't mean that I'm going to do the same. If you want to go play in her new life, be my guest." She stacked up her books and stormed out of the library.

Severus watched the older girl depart and her sister a few seconds later. He couldn't believe how bitter Julia was toward him. And it surprised him that she wasn't even willing to listen to her sister. This was definitely problematic, and he didn't have a solution. This bothered him. He did not like being helpless.

Had it been any other student, he would have given her detention, but Julia was an exemplary student, and he could find no reason to assign it to her. Had she been Gryffindor, he could have found an excuse, but she was Ravenclaw. He would be more vigilant about observing her in class and look for an opportunity.

For once, Aurelia returned to the castle before Snape returned to their quarters. She found this odd, since she knew he didn't have class. Heading out the door, she made her way to his private lab and found him toiling over a cauldron. Suddenly, she remembered that full moon was coming, and he would be working on the Wolfsbane Potion. Taking a seat away from the cauldron, she waited for him to acknowledge her.

"Did you need something?" he asked between steps.

"I was wondering if you could come by for lunch tomorrow."

He stared at her for a few seconds. "Is there something significant about tomorrow?"

"Not really. I set an appointment with the head of the maternity ward at that time, and I thought you might like to come."

"For what purpose?" he asked simply.

She couldn't help smiling at his innocence. "I thought that you might like to get involved in our child's life. And we can find out what sex the baby is."

"Sex?"

"Yes. You know, whether it's a boy or a girl?" she replied sarcastically.

"I know that. You mean they can tell that ahead of time?"

"You truly have lived in an entirely different world, haven't you? They can tell earlier, but they like to wait until the end of the first trimester, which is coming up. I thought we could do it before the holidays." She had moved behind him and now had her arms wrapped around him.

"Did you know before the girls were born?" He swiveled on his stool to face her.

She shook her head. "Henry didn't want to know. He wanted it to be a surprise."

"And you? Do you want to know this time?"

"Oh, no, you don't. I want you to tell me first," she said playfully.

He thought for several minutes before answering. "I will meet you for lunch, but I will have to think on whether I want to know or not."

She gave him a deep kiss before pulling away. "Once you've got the potion stabilized for the night, I'll be across the hall."

The following afternoon, Severus found himself pacing her office. Johnson had told him that she was still at a staff meeting, but should be back momentarily. If there was one thing he hated, it was waiting.

"I'm terribly sorry," Aurelia apologized as she came through the door. "You know how staff meetings are. There's always one person there who is in love with the sound of his voice and drags it on for everyone else. Jarrett will be waiting for us. Are you ready?"

"I am," he replied nervously. Today, he was going to find out if Aurelia was having a son or a daughter. He was still trying to get used to the fact that he was going to be a father, which was difficult enough because she didn't look pregnant yet. Now, his anxiety was about to be intensified. They would start talking about names, looking at furniture and clothing for the baby.

When they entered the exam room, an elderly Healer greeted them. "Aurelia, good to see you. And this must be Severus. Pleasure to meet you. I'm Jarrett White."

"Healer," Severus said curtly as he shook hands.

Jarrett laughed. "No need to be formal. Jarrett will do. Now, Aurelia, if you'll just lie back, this won't take long at all."

Severus was incredibly anxious as the examination began. What if there was something wrong with his child? Holding Aurelia's hand, he noticed that she seemed oddly calm. Of course, she had been through this before. He watched the indecipherable mess the magic cast by the Healer produced around Aurelia. He could not determine how they could make anything of it.

After a few moments, Jarrett looked up, a broad grin on his face. "Everything looks fine. Mother and child are both perfectly healthy. So, are you interested in learning if it's a boy or a girl?" he asked as he looked between the expectant couple.

Aurelia looked into Severus's eyes. "Well?"

Not breaking her gaze, he replied. "Quite interested." He then looked at Jarrett expectantly.

"I'm pleased to let you know that your child is a boy. Congratulations."

"Well, I guess none of the clothes I have boxed up will do me any good," Aurelia said, but she did not look at all upset by the news.

Severus still wasn't sure what he thought about that. Apparently, the Snape name would not die with him. "A son," he whispered.

"I'm assuming that you don't have any questions that Aurelia can't answer, so I'll leave the two of you. Aurelia, see you next month."

"Thank you, Jarrett," she replied. "Well? What do you think?" she asked nervously.

"I think that I am a very lucky man. Why don't we go get some lunch and celebrate?"

"Let me stop by my office, first. We can look at some brochures and decide what we want to do in Budapest."

"Were you under the impression we were going to leave our hotel?" He tried to maintain a straight face as he asked that question.

She looked at him for several seconds before smiling mischievously. "I thought a little fresh air could be reinvigorating."

As the term drew to a close, Aurelia was still upset that Julia was still not talking to her. In fact, it seemed to get worse after the Easter holiday. Severus and Aurelia had spent the break in Budapest, Hungary, enjoying the history, culture and wizarding community. Severus had surprised her with his knowledge of Hungarian. While they were gone, she was able to temporarily forget about her estrangement with her older daughter.

Now she knew that school would be ending in a few weeks, and she hoped that she could reconcile with Julia once they were back at home. The castle was large enough, and Julia was busy enough that she could avoid her mother. Back at their house, she would not have that ability.

Deciding she needed to talk to someone about this, she headed up to the library on one of her rare days off.

"Do you have some time?" she asked Eileen.

"Of course. You know you can come visit whenever you like," Eileen said warmly as she led Aurelia to her office.

"I know. It's just been very hectic. We're seeing quite a bit more poisoning than we normally see. Of course, we do get a springtime surge as folks look for ways to improve their gardens and start dallying with potions that are beyond their capabilities."

"You aren't working too hard, are you? You look tired." Eileen sounded concerned as she passed the teacup to Aurelia.

"No, it's not that. My little gymnast here," she rubbed her gently swollen stomach, "prefers to perform at night. He's quite good at keeping me up."

Eileen gave her a reassuring smile. "I know how that is. Severus was quite the active baby, too. He must get it from his father."

Aurelia laughed. "That's what I tell him. But that's not why I'm here."

"I didn't think it was. What's on your mind, dear?"

Aurelia sighed and leaned back into the chair before launching into the explanation of Julia's behavior. "I have tried to talk to her, tried to let her know that I still love her and that I still think of her father, but I don't know if she pays attention to my letters. Sometimes she replies and sometimes she tells her sister to pass on to me that she got my letter. I don't know what to do with her, and we're all going to be home in a couple of weeks, and I'm very worried."

"Teenagers are very hard to deal with. I should know after having been here for as long as I have. Unless you can get her to listen to you, there's not much you can do. Just keep showing her that you love her. At some point she's bound to realize that she misses you."

"I know that. I just want us to feel like a family. Helen has been absolutely wonderful. She's excited about having a brother, and she likes Severus. I don't think that Julia dislikes him; she just dislikes the idea of the two of us together. I just want us to be happy," Aurelia said as she started crying. Dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief, she said, "And these hormones aren't helping. I can't really think about her without falling to pieces."

Eileen conjured the chair into a couch and sat next to Aurelia, giving the younger witch a reassuring hug. "I know how hard it must be. All of you have been through so much in the last year and a half. Everyone grieves differently and for different amounts of time. I know it's hard not to think about how she's behaving toward you, but you shouldn't dwell on it. Keep trying to connect with her, but don't take it personally when she chooses to ignore you. It's not good for you, and it's not good for the baby."

Aurelia sniffed. "I know. It's j-just so hard."

Eileen just held her for a while, waiting for the tears to subside. "Now, about that dungeon," she said to change the subject.

Aurelia raised her head and looked at her curiously. "What about it?"

"I was thinking that's not a good place to have nursery, wouldn't you agree?"

"I...suppose I hadn't thought about it, but you're right. I would like someplace with a little more sunlight."

"My thought exactly. I was speaking with Adrian about this the other day, and there are plenty of open quarters in the higher levels. If you have time, I think we should go look at a few, and if you find something you like, you can show Severus later."

Aurelia smiled. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

A/N: I'm terribly sorry for the long delay. I hope that the next chapter won't have so long a delay. Real life can be too much sometimes, can't it?

Thanks to Zen Lady for her help betaing this chapter for me.

Additionally, if you are interested on more information about Eileen Snape, I have recently started posting [After the Awakening](#), which will parallel parts of this story and show events from Eileen's point of view.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 16

Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster, is beholden to no man with the Dark Lord finally vanquished and Dumbledore gone. He is free to choose the course that his life takes, to make friends, to finally know what it means to lead a normal life. How does he adapt to being able to experience this normality. Sequel to "Wounded" (the link is in the story). Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 16

The term was almost over, and Severus was looking forward to some time away from school. He had a new appreciation for what Minerva had done as Deputy. It wasn't that the work was difficult, just that it was tedious. Of course, he would not have much time off during the summer, as he had to see to the letter for the new first years as well as the book lists for all the classes.

Since it was the lull before exams, he had decided to see if Aurelia was in their quarters. She had indicated she had some errands to run, but she had expected to be back early in the afternoon. He would take advantage of his free period.

When he did not find her in their quarters, he started to grow concerned. She should have been back by now; it was not like her to wander the castle. After checking her office at St. Mungo's through the Floo and finding she was not there either, he began pacing nervously.

When the door finally opened, he snapped, "Where have you been?"

"Good afternoon, to you, too," she replied. With a few quick waves of her wand, she summoned the tea set and soon had a cup of steaming tea in hand.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"I was with your mother, and then we were looking at some of the vacant quarters here in the castle."

"You should have left a note so that I would know where you were."

"Honestly, Severus, you don't expect to know where I am every second of the day, do you?"

He scowled at her cavalier attitude. "Something could have happened to you, to our son, and I wouldn't know about it until it was too late," he said defensively.

Setting her teacup down, she motioned for him to sit next to her. After he had done so, she said, "I won't do anything reckless. It's just not who I am. I'm sorry that I gave you cause to worry." She leaned into him, enjoying being near him.

He wrapped his arm around her, relieved that she was safe. After her kidnapping, he had become more paranoid about her going anywhere alone, especially since Malfoy was free. His other hand gently rested on her stomach, trying to feel his son moving within her. That morning, he had felt the movement for the first time. Suddenly, part of what she had told him registered. "What were you looking at vacant quarters for?"

"Well, your quarters here are a little cramped for the two of us and a baby."

"This is an enchanted castle. Another room could be added quite easily."

She sighed. "It's not only that. This is a dungeon, and a nursery should be light and airy. I'm afraid we won't get that with only the transom windows."

He was about to protest when he recalled his mother's advice about marriage requiring compromises. "Where are these quarters?"

"On the second floor, away from the classrooms. There's a lovely window that faces the lake. We could move the furnishings from here up there. Will you come take a look?" she asked excitedly.

He had seen some of the quarters on the second floor, and those that he had were not ones that he could imagine himself living in. "Of course," he replied reluctantly.

Once on the second floor, he could tell how much the move would mean to her. She grew quite animated as she discussed the layout of the room. He did have to admit that the view was quite spectacular.

"And you can keep your office down in the dungeon, but I think this would be much better for raising a child, don't you think?"

Her words barely penetrated his consciousness. He was trying to determine if he could stand living here. Most of his life had been spent living in darkness and shadows, and it was hard for him to shed his aversion to the light. He reasoned that he had survived at her house, and this was not really all that different. Memories of hiding in darkness during his childhood made him realize that he could not subject his son to the same thing. He would try to provide his son with those things that he had not had as a child.

"It is," he finally answered. "I will see that our things are moved up here over the summer." This would be one of those sacrifices Eileen had mentioned.

She had a huge grin on her face when she threw her arms around him. "Thank you very much."

After the students were gone, Severus escorted Aurelia to the gates. It was a nice day, and she had convinced him they should walk to the gates rather than ride in one of the carriages. Their trip home was much shorter than the girls' would be. Once the unpacking was finished, Aurelia saw that it was time to go to London.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" he asked.

"No. I think it will be best if you don't. I'd like a little time with Julia." She gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine. Really. It might be a couple of hours or it might be rather short. It depends on her."

"Be careful."

She gave him a reassuring smile. "You worry too much, darling."

As Aurelia waited for the train, she couldn't help but feel nervous. She had not really communicated with Julia since she had announced her impending marriage, and Helen was still rather reluctant to mention her sister whenever they talked.

When the train arrived at the station, Helen was one of the first students off the train, rushing over to give her mother a hug. "Where's Professor Snape?" she asked quietly.

"He's at home." Having Helen by her side made her feel slightly less nervous.

Finally, Julia emerged, one of the last students left off the train. She did not look pleased. "I suppose ~~he~~ he's at home," she said disdainfully.

Aurelia suppressed a sigh. "He is. I thought you might like to have a butterbeer at the Leaky Cauldron before we go home."

"Why?"

"I thought you might like to talk about what's happened."

"Not really," Julia said shortly. "I'd rather just go home." As they started walking out of the station, she continued. "Elizabeth has invited me to spend part of the summer with her."

"I see. We'll discuss that later. I won't have you spending your entire vacation at someone else's house," Aurelia said, noticing that Julia was not pleased to hear that.

The rest of the journey to the Leaky Cauldron and through the Floo was spent in silence. By the time Aurelia Apparated home, Julia was already up in her room. She held back her tears. "Helen, why don't you go up and unpack before dinner." After her younger daughter was upstairs, she hurried down the hall and slammed the door to the library shut before collapsing in tears on the sofa.

It was not long before she felt strong arms on her shoulder, and Severus pulled her against his chest.

He held her and let her cry herself out before asking, "Julia still isn't talking to you, is she?"

She sniffed, wiping her nose with the handkerchief he had given her. When she replied, she was hiccupping. "N-no. I do-don't know what t-to do."

Holding her and rubbing her back, he replied, "Just wait. She will be forced to confront the situation sooner or later."

That started a fresh round of tears. "She-she doesn't want to b-be here. She w-wants to l-leave."

"Shhh. Just calm down. We'll deal with this later. Right now, I want you to relax and get some rest before dinner. You have about half an hour."

Wiping at her tears, she said, "No. I'm all right. I want to help."

Placing his hand on her cheek, he said. "I insist that you rest. Besides, there isn't much left for you to do." Before leaving, he kissed her gently on the lips.

The next two weeks were anything but pleasant. When Julia was home, she sequestered herself in her room other than for meals during which she volunteered nothing. If Aurelia asked her any questions, she made the answers as brief as possible.

Severus did his best to give Aurelia time alone with Julia, but it didn't seem to be helping. Aurelia was growing more and more despondent, and he was concerned about her. He didn't think that she was eating properly, and he knew that she wasn't getting enough sleep. Deciding that Julia had been indulged for long enough, he decided to have a talk with her whether she wanted to or not.

After Aurelia went to work, he knocked on Julia's door.

"Go away!" she shouted.

"Julia, open this door. I need to speak with you."

"I don't want to talk to you."

Reaching for the doorknob, he found that it was locked. While he could easily unlock it, he would prefer for her to let him in voluntarily. "This is about your mother. It is very important and you *will* let me in."

"I don't have to do anything you say. You're not my father."

He was rather quickly losing what little patience he had, and he waved his wand at the door. "True, I am not your father," he said from the now open doorway. "But I love your mother very much, and this grudge you are holding against her is affecting her health."

"So?" Julia asked as she turned her back on him.

Grabbing her shoulder, he pulled her around to face him. "I fear your brother's life may be in danger if she does not start taking better care of herself."

"Good," she snarled.

He barely maintained control of his rage, replying through clinched teeth, "I know that you do not mean you want an innocent life to come to harm." After taking a deep breath, he said, "I am not asking you to like me. I am not asking you to like the fact that your mother and I are married. What I am asking is that you quit treating her as though she does not exist. She loves you very much."

"Hmph," Julia replied.

"She cries herself to sleep every night because of how you are treating her. I know that you are too self-absorbed in your personal teenage angst to realize how much your behavior hurts her, but if you paid attention for even one evening, you would see how much she truly loves you. If she did not love you, would she send you a letter every week inviting you to tea? If you still do not believe me, talk to your sister." He didn't like discussing Aurelia's most personal feelings, but he knew that Julia needed to hear the truth.

"Like I'm really supposed to believe you?" she retorted.

"I don't care if you believe me or not. Trust your own eyes and make the observations yourself. But whatever you do, you will cease this pouting in your room, and you *will* spend time with your mother. Starting this evening when she gets home." He spun on his heel and left her room without closing the door.

That evening, dinner progressed somewhat better than it had since the end of term. While Julia was not exactly chatty, she was at least answering with more than one-word responses, and she was looking around the table rather than staring at her plate.

Severus took this as a step in the right direction, but he suspected that it would take more than one day for Julia to begin to accept their new family dynamic.

Over the course of the next few days, Aurelia noticed that Julia wasn't avoiding her quite as much. She did still ask to spend time at her friends' houses, but not all day, every day. Julia still wasn't really conversing with anyone, at least not that Aurelia knew of, but she hoped this was a step in the right direction.

On Saturday morning, she was up early preparing breakfast when Julia joined her in the kitchen. "Can I lend a hand, Mum?" Julia asked softly.

Aurelia smiled broadly. "Of course you may." She was amazed that Julia was not only talking to her, but offering to help, besides.

Julia looked at her slippers. "I'm...I'm sorry."

At this apology, Aurelia nearly crushed Julia in a smothering embrace and started crying tears of happiness.

"Mum. Too tight," Julia said, her voice muffled against her mother.

"Terribly sorry," replied Aurelia as she released her daughter.

Aurelia led her to the table. "I should have been more considerate of your feelings. I know that it was an awfully big change in a very short period of time."

"I'm sorry I've been so horrible to you."

"It's all right, dear. I know this has been terribly hard on everyone. Truce?"

Julia smiled weakly, as though she still felt guilty about her behavior. "Truce. Let me do breakfast this morning."

"You know what? Why don't we do this together?"

Aurelia couldn't be happier as she finally got Julia to open up to her. As the two of them prepared breakfast, Aurelia listened to Julia tell her about her exams, how her school year had gone and how she was thinking about becoming a Healer after graduation.

The remainder of the summer passed much more smoothly. At the end of July, Severus had to spend time at Hogwarts preparing the letters for the incoming students. Thankfully, the quill was automated, and he only had to dictate the names of the incoming students who were to be invited and verify the list of returning students.

The tedious part was dispatching the owls. He did not like making trips to the Owlery, thus he had his own owl for personal correspondence, but in this case, the school owls had to be used just due to the sheer volume of letters.

He also knew there was a very difficult topic he needed to bring up with Aurelia. He knew that she would not take it well, but he really could not put it off much longer. He would have to address it when he returned home.

Home. What an odd concept that he no longer thought of Spinner's End as his summer home. Early in the summer, he had taken Helen with him to retrieve his books. He did not care about any of the other possessions. He had never left any of his Potions materials at the house during the school year. He did have wards set up, since he had some material there that he did not like to leave unguarded. Now, he was reasonably sure that he would not be returning there again.

When he arrived at home, he found it was much later than he had thought. Dinner was already on the table. "I lost track of time," he said simply.

Aurelia replied, "Don't worry about it. I put a warming charm on the food."

After dinner, they retired to the living room and played games for a little while before Aurelia excused herself for bed, warning the girls not to stay up too late.

Severus followed her upstairs.

"There was no need for you to turn in this early."

"That's not why I'm here." He sat on the bed and patted next to him. He still couldn't believe how much his son was growing. When the summer holidays had started, she had barely been showing. Now, there was no doubt that she was carrying his child. Placing his hand on her stomach, he asked, "How long were you planning on working?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe another month."

This was not the answer he had hoped for. He knew that once they returned to Hogwarts, she would have to use the Floo and that Floo travel did not agree with her even under normal circumstances. "That would put you rather close to your due date, wouldn't it?" he asked cautiously.

"A couple of weeks. Why?"

"You cannot Disapparate from the castle, and I do not like you using the Floo."

"I'm not taking a leave of absence when the term starts. There is no reason I cannot continue to work."

He realized that he was on the verge of getting himself into trouble, but at this point, he didn't care; he only cared that she and his son were healthy. "No? You have had a very rough time of things this summer."

"But that's over. Everything has been fine since Julia and I worked out our differences," she insisted.

"I know. But you have been under more than enough stress as it is. I don't think you need the added stress of using the Floo."

"Well, I don't think you are qualified to make that judgment. *You* are not a Healer," she snapped.

She was definitely taking this even worse than he had anticipated. "Aurelia, I am only looking out for you..."

"Smothering me is more like it. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"I didn't say you weren't." He tried not to become defensive, but it was hard to ignore her attacks.

"But you implied it. I have raised two wonderful and well-behaved girls. I think I know a great deal more about raising children than you do. I will keep my own counsel on this."

She was crying again, and he tried to comfort her. Normally, she would collapse into his arms and try to draw strength from him, but this time she shoved him away.

"Just... go away," she said and turned her back on him.

Deciding it was best to let her calm down a little, he left her alone.

Thankfully, the girls were already upstairs. The last thing he needed was either of them asking him why he was downstairs again, especially Julia, who was polite with him, but not overly friendly. He tried to look through the latest issue of *Potions Quarterly*, but found he could not concentrate on the words.

After twenty minutes, he gave up and decided to go back upstairs and see if she would see reason. Slowly, he opened the bedroom door and could see her lying with her back to the door. He stripped down to his boxer shorts and crawled into bed behind her, wrapping his arm around her, letting his hand lie gently on her stomach. "Aurelia?" he asked softly.

"What?" she snapped.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. Apparently, she had not completely calmed down. "I'm sorry I upset you. I'm concerned and... inexperienced." He hated admitting when he did not know something, but despite the books he had read, he was still quite ignorant of what occurred during pregnancy.

"I shouldn't have snapped at you." She pressed herself against him, placing her hand on his. "I should have listened to your concerns. I know I don't always react well to Floo travel, but I'll be fine. There is an alarm on my office that chimes in the Ward when the Floo is used, and you can set one up at Hogwarts that will enable a house-elf to check on me."

It was something, a small consolation, but it wasn't enough to ease his concerns. "Since most of your work is administrative, perhaps you could cut back on the number of days you go to the office? Our new quarters are large enough to afford you a work area." He trailed his hand along her stomach, drifting lower, hoping to distract her so that she would agree to his wishes.

"Are you trying to distract me?" she asked playfully.

"Is it working?" he whispered seductively into her ear.

"Perhaps," she answered coyly as she placed her hand on his thigh.

"Just a moment; let me cast a Silencing Charm." Rolling over, he grabbed his wand from the table and flicked it at the door. When he rolled back over, Aurelia's lips met his, and she gave him a deep kiss. He didn't think that he would ever completely get used to these mood swings, but when they happened like this, he was not going to complain, and he eagerly returned the kiss. At the same time, he slipped his hand under her nightgown, wanting to feel her skin against his.

He was not alone in wanting to be rid of clothing. She tugged at his boxers until he was able to get out of them, and then she firmly grasped him, quickly bringing him to full erection. "I love you," she whispered breathily.

"I love you, too," he whispered as he shifted behind her, eager for release. Reaching down, he found her as aroused as he was. He loved the changes to her body as his child grew within her. He especially enjoyed her increased libido.

As he teased her, she squirmed and moaned for him to continue. "Severus, please."

"Not yet, darling." He gently caressed her breast, enjoying the soft feel and how she arched her back against him. When he could not longer hold back, he finally did as she asked, glad that he had placed a Silencing Charm on the room. At times like this, she was very vocal. As she snuggled against him, he enjoyed her closeness, knowing his life was soon to change and these moments would become more infrequent.

On September first, he accompanied everyone to the train station, though he waited just inside the barrier, hoping not to be noticed. He did not need to draw attention to his presence.

As the train pulled away, he could tell that she was fighting back the tears, and he slipped to her side, placing his arm around her. "Are you all right?"

She dabbed at her eyes. "I'll be fine. Just a little emotional. I never expected to feel this way about them leaving."

"Are you sure you're all right?" They had planned on Apparating straight to Hogwarts, but he wasn't sure if she was up to it.

"I'm fine. I just need a minute."

"Take your time." He led her over to a bench. By now, the platform was nearly empty.

After a couple of minutes, she said, "I'm ready."

When they Apparated to the Hogwarts' gate, a carriage was waiting for them. Aurelia saw the beasts hitched to the carriage and instinctively pulled away. "Oh, my!"

He held her protectively. "It's a Thestral and it's perfectly safe." He had not thought that she might not be familiar with Thestrals.

"Have they always pulled the carriages?"

"Yes. But you can only see them if you have seen someone die."

"Ah. I never took much interest in Care of Magical Creatures." She let him lead her to the carriage. As they rode up to the castle, she didn't say anything, but merely leaned against him for comfort, still disturbed by the Thestrals.

While walking into the castle, he asked, "Would you prefer to take lunch with the staff or in our quarters?"

"Let's eat with the staff." She followed him to the staff room, where they ate in the days leading up to the start of term.

As soon as they entered the room, Eileen hurried across the room to give Aurelia a hug. "Look at you. You look wonderful."

"Thank you. You should have come by this summer."

"Oh, I think you had enough going on that you didn't need me visiting. I'm so glad that you and Julia settled your differences."

"Me, too. It was hard having her not talk to me. And look at you? Looks like you've been busy this summer."

At this, Severus appraised his mother. His attention had been focused on Remus and Kalliope sitting together on one of the sofas trying to occupy the same space. He noticed that she looked tan and was smiling quite broadly. Over her shoulder, he caught a glimpse of Adrian looking equally tan and relaxed.

Before he could say anything, Adrian announced, "Well, now that we are all here, let's eat lunch."

Eileen took a seat next to Severus. Once conversation started back up, she leaned over and whispered, "I would like to let the staff know about our relation to each other."

From the tone of her letters, he had expected this. "And the students?"

"I doubt many of them know my first name, and I'm not opposed to keeping Pince as my last name."

He really couldn't see any reason to oppose her request. "I think it would be good to reveal this secret. After all, I see no reason to keep it anymore."

She smiled broadly. "Thank you." Turning her attention to the table, she said, "Excuse me, everyone. I have an announcement to make." Once the table was silent, she continued. "During the first war, I had a powerful memory charm placed on me for my protection. It was removed during the last school year. I spent a good portion of that year trying to come to terms with the removal of the charm, and the resulting changes in my life. After having time away from school, I have decided to reveal my true identity to the staff.

"My real name is Eileen Snape. Severus and Albus Dumbledore worked together to keep me safe, to protect me from You-Know-Who.

"I've decided that I will retain Pince as my last name, but I would prefer if you would address me as Eileen. Thank you."

There were a few moments of silence before people started asking her and Severus questions. He was pleased when Aurelia gave his leg a reassuring squeeze.

This term progressed much better than the previous one had. The first few weekends, Aurelia enlisted Helen and Julia to help her set up the nursery for the baby. Eileen would come join them, too, when she could get away from the library.

Severus was glad that she had the extra help. He had given up on suggesting that she not do things, but instead had started offering to do them for her. This had met with more success than his previous attempts at modifying her behavior.

Of course, with her due date rapidly approaching, she was more willing to rest and utilize the house-elves. He was glad that she was no longer commuting to St. Mungo's. What little work she did was generally sent by owl.

That night, he thought that she was taking longer than normal to get comfortable. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine, darling. Just having a bit of a hard time settling down."

"You aren't having contractions, are you?" He knew that the baby was past due.

"No."

"You...aren't worried about this?" He could not keep the concern out of his voice.

She laughed softly. "It's not really a big deal. Both girls were late, too. Babies don't come on a specific day."

"I know. I'm just concerned." He rubbed her stomach.

"Mmmm. That feels good. Maybe you could rub my back, too."

"Of course."

Through the next week's worth of classes, he was incredibly distracted. He was taking all his meals in his quarters, and it was not unheard of for him to rush up to their quarters during breaks.

Thankfully, his students had quickly caught on to his edgy mood and were incredibly careful not to provoke him once word got around that he was even taking points from Slytherins.

On Thursday, he was instructing the sixth year N.E.W.T students when Eileen burst in through the door. "It's time," she shouted out.

Severus dropped the textbook to the floor and rushed out of the room.

"Miss MacLean, you too," Eileen said. "The rest of you, finish your potions."

Severus ran for the hospital wing as quickly as he could. At this point, he didn't care how undignified he looked. "Aurelia?" he called out as he hurried into the private room they had prepared for her.

She smiled at him. "I wasn't sure you'd make it." She grimaced as she had another contraction.

He took hold of her hand and immediately regretted that decision as it felt as though she were going to crush it. "So soon?"

"And thank goodness, too."

"Are you ready?" asked Poppy.

She nodded and released Severus's hand as she gripped her thighs.

Theoretically, he knew what to expect. Realistically, he was not prepared for it to happen so quickly. He was in a daze as he watched her going through the birthing process. It wasn't long before he heard the wails of his son and saw Poppy handing the small, screaming child to Aurelia.

"Severus?"

Someone was calling his name. "Yes?"

"Would you like to cut the cord?" Poppy asked in a tone of voice that suggested she had been trying to get his attention for a while.

"Of course." He tapped his wand where Poppy had indicated.

"Did you want to hold him?" Aurelia asked.

"Hold him?" He was still in a bit of a state of shock. She held him out for him, and he tentatively took the wriggling child in his arms. He held tight, afraid the baby would squirm out of his arms.

"Not so hard. He's not going anywhere," Aurelia said gently.

Slowly, he relaxed, becoming more comfortable with holding his son. "My son," he said softly. Noticing Julia at his side, he asked, "Would you like to hold your brother?" As he transferred the child to her arms, the door opened again. Eileen and Helen were quite winded, having run up from Care of Magical Creatures.

"Are we too late?" Eileen asked.

"Just," replied Severus. "Helen, come see your brother." As Helen and Eileen crowded around Julia, he noticed that Aurelia was crying. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just so happy that everyone is here. Our whole family."

He sat down on the bed and embraced her. "What did you want to name him?"

"You still don't have an idea?"

"I told you. I'll let you choose his name."

"Mum? What's his name?" Helen asked as she handed her brother over.

"Well, if Severus agrees, Marcus Aurelius."

He thought about this for a second. "I think that is an excellent name. Welcome, Marcus."

~The End~

A/N: First and foremost, thanks to Zen Lady and nota for their dedicated work beta reading this story for me. Second, thanks to all the readers, especially those who have taken the time to leave a review.

Now, for those that are interested in more behind the scenes action for this story, I have started writing a look at Eileen's point of view of these events. It's called "After the Awakening". It picks up in Chapter 3 after Severus removes the charm. [Click here](#).