

The Anatomy of True Friendship

by arynwy

For the first time in Severus Snape's life, he actually has the girl. Now, all he has to do is figure out if he truly wants to keep her.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 5

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Prologue

"So. You're really going to do it."

"Yeah, it took a while, but I'm certain."

"Ron, I really am happy for you — Marissa is wonderful," Hermione said with a smile as she was pulled into a warm hug by her friend of nineteen years.

"Yeah, I know," he replied, favouring her with a silly grin. Pushing her back far enough to look her in the eyes, he sobered. "You've got to promise me that you won't close yourself off — that you'll get out and try to make new friends, take a swing at an actual relationship." When her smile faltered and she didn't respond immediately, he embraced her again, kissing her gently on the forehead before he spoke. "Hermione?"

"I'll be fine. Things aren't as bad as before — I'm in a better place now. I promise, and I'll actually keep it this time. Marissa will hate me if you both spend all of your time worrying about me," she mumbled into his shoulder as she hugged him tightly before stepping away. "Besides, I've got it easy — you've got to deal with your mum and her expectations. I've been covering for you and Marissa for months. Between Molly and the media fallout. . ."

He laughed. "You really do have it easy — the reporters are terrified of you. I wish I had half the dirt on them that you do."

"They actually like you," she replied before issuing a little a snort. "I needed the dirt to get them to lay off."

"True, that. Besides, you can just immerse yourself in one of your projects until the dust settles."

"I could," she said with a smile. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out her planner and placed it on the counter. "So, when will you propose?" she asked, as she made adjustments to her schedule to reflect the change in her and Ron's status.

"I'm taking Marissa out to Muggle London tomorrow. If she accepts, we'll go tell my mum together that evening or the next morning. I figure we have a maximum of three days before the papers hear and run with the story."

Hermione nodded absently in agreement as she flipped forward to make a note, freezing as a look of pure loathing crossed her features.

"What's wrong?" he asked, leaning over to look at what was written.

"This. I can't get out of it, and that means I'll have to deal with all of the idiots that think I need a bit of sympathy or some such," she replied angrily, shoving the planner in his face.

He looked at the entry and winced. "I always did have crap timing."

Hermione looked on as he considered the situation while leaning on the counter, gazing at nothing. When he finally looked back at her, his eyes were bright and he smirked, causing her to cringe in dismay.

"Oh, no. No, no, no — what are you planning, Ronald Weasley?"

His smirk grew even wider as he pushed the planner aside and grabbed her hand.

"It just occurred to me that Marissa would *never* forgive me if she was subjected to months of wedding planning and media attention — she hates that more than you, so the only solution is to elope. Harry is free tomorrow. It could be the last big adventure for the three of us."

"Molly will kill us all," she groaned, snatching her hand back as she turned away from him.

"Nah, she got her wedding of the century with Ginny and Harry. Both Percy and George had respectable services as well. She'll just have to settle for a grand reception to congratulate us after the fact."

She watched him warily as he walked about until he faced her again, feeling emotions dance in her gut that she hadn't felt in years. He gave her a playful grin and murmured seductively, "*You know you want to*— you haven't done anything sneaky in ages."

"I've had good reason not to," she replied huffily.

He shrugged in response. "You realise that if we pull this off, all of us will come out looking good, and before things settle down, you will have taken care of that little obligation there," he said, nodding to the entry in question. "They'll all be talking about how the three legendary friends banded together to give Marissa the privacy she wanted. Even Rita will be hard-pressed to turn the situation into another one of her tawdry smear campaigns."

She had to admit that his idea was strategically sound and would neatly tie up the nasty rumours that would otherwise run rampant and allow her to hang onto the leverage she currently had over the more problematic members of the press.

"If Harry says yes, I'll do it."

"Of course he will, and Marissa will love the idea. Gretna Green at two tomorrow, with a short press release after. You can make the arrangements with Dennis?"

"You're insane Ron, but I wouldn't miss this for the world. I'll take care of Dennis."

"Glad to know some things never change. You and Harry are the best," he replied as he took her hand in his once more. "Friends?"

"Friends." They shook on it.

A/N: Written for absolute_tash, in response to her 2012 SSHG Gift Exchange prompt:

An adult Hermione and Snape have a "friend-with-benefits" situation. They sleep together, enjoy each other's company, but they are not a couple. And then Hermione meets someone else. What's Snape's reaction? Does he honestly wish her well and walk her down the aisle? Does he lick his wounded pride and become distant with her? Does he resort to nefarious means to be rid of her other paramour? Is he hurt, jealous, relieved? Show me WHY they have this arrangement, instead of a couple's situation. And show me how it resolves. No fluff, please. Mature, adult handling of an atypical situation.

I only ask that you keep the prompt request in mind while reading the rest of this tale — it will help later on.

I'd like to say a huge thank you to Aurette for being the best alpha/cheerleader a writer could ever ask for, to iulia_linnea for her SPaG beta skills and to talesofsnape for the Brit-picking and lovely icons and banner. I'd also like to mention that the above folk are brutally honest in their opinions and I love them all the more for that quality. These ladies rock.

Also, I'd like to thank karelia for the additional beta as this passes through the queue.

Part I

Chapter 2 of 5

In which Severus renews an old acquaintance.

Disclaimer: Not mine. Wish they were.

Part I

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It was mid-August, and as he strode through the new administrative wing of the redesigned Ministry of Magic, Severus smiled to himself while observing people almost instinctively rush to get out of his way. A great portion of them had attended Hogwarts during his seventeen-year tenure, so it wasn't all that surprising. Still, it had been ten years since he'd "retired". A few of them should have developed a backbone by now. Smirking, Severus turned and flung open the double doors to the amphitheatre that today's certification occupied and openly grinned as they smacked the door stops, causing several other attendees to flinch in response. His grin turned back into his classic smirk when all of the chatter ground to a halt as he swiftly made his way towards the upper gallery. Playing with public perceptions was always entertaining and these particular idiots were more susceptible than most.

Satisfied that his little performance had discouraged anyone from speaking to him, he paused slightly in order to scan a specific section of the gallery. He had a particular seat in mind that he always used. It was located at the very top, in the far left corner in the last row, second in from the wall. Sitting there guaranteed that no one would sit next to him on either side or in the chairs occupying the row just in front of him, effectively giving him the privacy needed to work on his latest crossword puzzle magazine. It only took a moment to confirm that it, along with all the others around it were empty. A few minutes later, Severus was happily situated and working on his puzzles, secure in the fact that no one in their right mind would bother him until it was time to sit the equally mindless exam given at the end of the seminar.

There were certain events that Severus could use to literally mark the steady passage of time: the annual Malfoy Yule Gala, the annual Victory Ball, and his monthly stipend as a recipient of the Order of Merlin. Most of these events he could ignore ... they happened with or without his presence or input. Unfortunately, this was one bi-annual event that *did* require his personal attention as well as his attendance: the Ministry's mandatory Cross-Cultural Magical Beings Tolerance seminar. Each time he received the notice, he made a promise to himself ... when his current Ministry of Magic contracts expired, he wouldn't renew them. Then, he could stop wasting his time attending the bi-annual brainwashing attempts.

The problem was, every time he made the decision, yet another of his associates picked up a contract with the Ministry, rendering his own desires moot. You couldn't do business with other entities that held MoM contracts unless you also had current CCMBT certification. If he had to sit through the mindless social retraining love-fest in order to do business in general, he might as well hang onto the increasingly lucrative contracts in recompense. Or so his current mental justifications went. Besides, attending also served as somewhat of a guide of who he actually had to consider speaking with in the course of his own employment.

Shrugging to himself mentally, Severus refocused on the clue for 40 across ...*Sorrowful plant? Three letters? . . . R U E*... only to be disrupted. *How bloody appropriate.*

"Oh, good! You *are* here, just like Harry said you would be. Pretend I'm not. I'm just going to take that inside seat, excuse me by the way, and I won't speak another bloody word to you."

Severus looked up in consternation as Hermione Granger suited action to words and occupied the seat, promptly ignoring him as she pulled out a copy of what appeared to be some type of word search magazine along with a fountain pen. She took a quick moment to charm the cover to match the approved CCMBT workbook that he hadn't bothered with since the first seminar, before starting one of the puzzles. When several minutes went by in silence, he nodded to himself and went back to his own entertainment. Severus was still reasonably certain that no one would brave dealing with him in order to reach her. Which seemed to be rather the point? Which moved Granger from the category of *minor annoyance* to *mildly interesting*.

Fortunately for all involved, his estimates held. Plenty of people looked up in their direction, but that was the extent of it. The nearest foolhardy or brave soul in the room, depending on your outlook, sat two rows below at the opposite end of the gallery. All the remaining seats from that point forward were occupied.

Eventually, the appointed Ministry drone minced her way up to the podium to start her lecture. She was a squat older witch with absolutely no fashion sense whatsoever. Her high-pitched, falsely cheerful voice grated on Severus' last nerve.

"Good lord, where did they find her? All she needs is an Alice band and a pink cardie," he heard Granger mutter under her breath before she turned her attention back to her magazine.

He casually glanced over at Granger and his estimation of her went up another notch. Little Miss Granger was apparently all grown up now and not quite as quick to blindly respect authority, which wasn't surprising in the least, considering the fact that Dumbledore had handily put paid to that paradigm. Still, he had seen her a few times after the end of the war as she physically recovered from the damage of her year spent on the run. She hadn't been all that much to look at back then, but neither had most of her peers who'd managed to survive. He surreptitiously took another glance at her neat profile. She was definitely something to look at now.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic's Cross-Cultural Magical Beings Tolerance Seminar," the Umbridge lookalike announced flamboyantly, interrupting his current train of thought. "For most of you, this is a refresher, but for those that are new, the Cross-Cultural Magical Beings Tolerance training is ..."

"Too much of a mouthful to swallow and you'd think that after ten years, *someone* could have found a name that makes a decent acronym," Granger grouched before flipping a page in her magazine to start a new puzzle.

It was against his better judgement, but he really couldn't let that comment pass. "You honestly think that the Ministry, the same organization that helped produce three Dark Lords in two consecutive generations with its hypocritical policies, is capable of administering a program that will actually promote positive change, let alone naming it?" he muttered back as he leaned forward to stretch a kink in his back.

"Three?" she whispered back.

He snorted in response. "Please tell me that you don't actually want to argue the fact that Dumbledore ..."

"Oh, no, you'll get no argument from me. It's just that I'd relegated him to the "failed Dark Lord" column, which leaves him a rather dull shade of grey in practice," she replied primly and returned her attention back to her magazine.

He waited for her to continue, but she really was keeping to her word and staying quiet. Mostly. He selectively blocked out the voice of the presenter and returned to his observation of the young woman sitting next to him. She wasn't what most would consider beautiful; however, he found her appealing all the same. Her figure was womanly, but not too lush. Her face was pretty, but it was her personality that gave it extra life and character. And the memorable mane of hair was currently tamed into a modern French Twist that showed off a lovely expanse of neck.

"The *Mythology* of Stereotypes. Really? Does that woman even understand how they come about?" she huffed quietly.

He blinked in consternation. They were more than halfway done with the lecture portion of the program, and he'd managed to ignore most of it, along with his beloved crossword puzzles, in favour of checking out Granger. Extraordinary. Looking at her again, he had to admire the delicate study of contradictions she portrayed. Her Muggle suit was understated, but tailored to showcase her lovely silhouette. The skirt was business length, but rode up when she crossed her legs to show off a nice bit of knee. One would think she wore the stylish over-robe as an afterthought, but he knew better. The pen that she idly tapped against her lips in concentration was a . . .

"Granger."

"Hmm?"

"Is that a Conway Stewart Duro Silver?"

She pulled back and looked at the sparkling red and sterling silver fountain pen fondly. "Yes, it is. I treated myself to it when I sold my first patent. What I really wanted was the Limited Cromwell, but I couldn't justify the expense." With a sad smile, she returned to her puzzles as if he didn't exist. Just in time for the lecturer to announce the short break before the exam that they were required to take in order to leave this small bit of Hell on earth.

He stood and stretched before turning his attention back to the human puzzle that sat before him.

"Granger."

"Yes?"

"You use a pen that cost more than six hundred quid to do word search puzzles?"

"Yes," she bit off as he continued to stare at her with his arms crossed, waiting for her to continue. She finally placed the cap on the pen in question and carefully attached

it to the cover of her magazine before crossing her arms with a sigh. "What do you want? I'd have thought a silent version of me would have pleased you."

"It might have in the past, but as you've chosen to use me as a barrier to the masses, I believe I'm entitled to a little more of you than that," he replied easily, leaning past his chair to rest a shoulder against the wall directly behind it.

"I'm sure I don't know what gave you that impression. You're barely a passing acquaintance as far as I'm concerned, even if I did choose to use you as a shield from the rest of the idiots in attendance."

"A passing acquaintance? You must be joking. After six years of dealing with you as a student ..."

"You know nothing about me that isn't public domain, and the same can be said for me where you are concerned," she snapped as she stood and gingerly stretched and paced up and down the row a bit to work out her stiffness before retaking her seat. She continued to ignore him while putting away her magazine and wrapping the pen in its leather case in preparation for the quill and exam booklets they would be issued when the break was over.

"Is there a reason that you've continued to stare at me, Mr Snape?"

He pushed himself upright and settled into his own chair before answering. "Yes. I find this version of you rather intriguing." Leaning closer, he smiled. "When we're done with this nonsense of test taking, I'll continue to play human shield and get you out of here if you would be so kind as to join me for lunch."

"Why would I want to do that?" she replied with a smile of her own.

"You could help redeem my rather lamentable reputation."

"I no longer tilt at windmills or champion lost causes," Granger stated flatly.

"Then let's call it a working lunch. You are currently working on a problem that involves me."

"I don't see how," she retorted.

"You are the Arithmancer of choice for the Coulson project, and I am the Dark Arts, Potions specialist and Spellcraftre for the same," he stated smugly as he watched her look of incredulity turn to wariness.

"Well, I suppose that moves you up from *passing acquaintance* to *almost colleague* on my personal friendship scale."

Severus chuckled. "That isn't much of an accomplishment, as I was nothing to you before."

"That's not true," she responded. "At Hogwarts, we had an association by way of proximity, with you in a position of power, leaving me at a disadvantage. Now, I could almost call you a colleague, which is a step above the casual acquaintance in my books. Although, seeing as our break is over and I have questions for you, it's more like *hated colleague* at the moment."

"I will happily satisfy your curiosity when you accompany me to lunch afterward," he said, smirking with satisfaction.

"You don't have to be so smug about it," she muttered under her breath as one of the proctors arrived to issue the Anti-cheating quills along with the exam booklets.

Oh, yes I do, he thought to himself as he took his supplies from the short man in front of him.

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It took him exactly twenty minutes to complete the multiple choice questions in the twenty page booklet. He looked up from it and noticed that Granger had finished hers as well, which didn't surprise him ... the test hadn't changed in ten years, not even the order of the questions. Nodding toward the front, he stood and made his way to the proctor at the opposite end of their row to turn in his exam, knowing that she would follow him without further discussion. There were two or three others that had finished and were also making their way to the exit. None of them seemed interested in doing more than clearing out themselves, which made things easier for the both of them. At least until they'd made it to the main hallway and started towards the Diagon Alley exit.

They were accosted by a reasonably attractive young man who bravely ignored Severus' presence.

"Miss Granger, did you get the owl I sent you yesterday? I know you've been busy, but I really would like to ..."

"Bollinger," she snapped, cutting him off. "I'm sure you've noticed that I'm with Master Snape at the moment." Severus nodded silently to add weight to the statement while taking note of her suddenly frosty demeanour. "We have business to conduct and his time is rather limited. As for your invitation, the answer is still no ... which is the same as you received with the morning post."

Severus watched as Bollinger woodenly stepped aside and allowed them to pass. He noticed the way she calmly acknowledged a few greetings that were directed her way while rolling her shoulders in annoyance as she ignored others. Also of interest was the fact that men consistently fell into the latter category.

"I don't know the history between the two of you, but I don't think Bollinger will be contacting you any time in the near future," he remarked as he stepped forward and held the door that led to the outside.

"Thank you. Don't feel sorry for him. He only wants to be seen with me in order to raise his standing within his department. He's not interested in me at all. I went out with him once and he spent the entire date showing me off to his fellows like I was a prize poodle or some such," she huffed as she went through the door.

"You'll want to head down the Alley past Ollivander's," he instructed. "We'll have lunch at the Spellcraftres' Guild, as we do need a bit of privacy for our discussion."

"Right. I was about to beg off. I'm really not in the mood to deal with all of the opportunists that think now is the perfect time to make a move on me, since it's now quite obvious that I'm available."

"And you don't think I'm attempting the same?" he asked.

"Even if you currently are ... this is more of a *quid pro quo* situation. I sought you out to my benefit and now, I am spending the time you've requested in exchange."

"I'm not at all certain I like all of the changes in your personality," he responded seriously. "You sound like members of my old House."

Granger snorted in response. "By now you should have realised that Slytherin doesn't have a corner on the market when it comes to cold practicality."

oOOOOo

They continued to walk in silence. Severus didn't attempt to start up the conversation again until they'd reached their destination and their order had been served.

"You know, I was rather impressed with the way you and your compatriots outmanoeuvred the press and Molly Weasley the other day. Word has it that Creevey received a rather generous bonus along with an extended leave for his exclusive."

"Word is true. *The Prophet* wanted the exclusive, but that meant Dennis would have to lay low for a while to prevent his fellow journalists from killing him since he's an independent. Ron came up with the strategy, I just handled logistics while Harry handled the spin and retreat." She shrugged as she took a bite of her grilled salmon. "Mmm, this is lovely. Thank you for inviting me here."

"You can repay me by satisfying my curiosity. Just what exactly is your *friendship scale* and why does it exist?"

She gave him a curious look before responding. "See that man over there?"

"Everley?"

"Yes. I dated him for a bit after Ron and I broke up the first time. He was very attentive and pretended that he actually wanted to get to know me instead of believing all of the media tripe."

Severus raised a questioning eyebrow in response.

"It took me a bit, but I came to realise that all he wanted was to be the one that recruited me to the Spellcraftres, along with a bit of slap and tickle on the side. When he understood that I wouldn't leave the Arithmancers, he didn't have the time of day for me."

"Not to make an excuse for the man, but he's a Guild recruiter and that is one of their known tactics," he interjected.

"Oh, I know that now, but nine years ago, it hurt. Then, there were all of the self-important slime that just wanted to bed me ... another notch on the post, as it were. At first, it was a bit flattering ... some of them were celebrities themselves and no one had ever accused me of being desirable before. Then, Rita and her ilk started after me. Ron and Harry could sleep with the world and not a thing was said, but I was a glory-seeking, man-eating slag. A rather vicious double-standard, yes? But I won't bore you with that."

I'm not finding this conversation boring in the least he mused, nodding thoughtfully.

"After that I was deep into my studies and starting my career. I no longer had the desire for anything that involved more than a date here and there. After dealing with so many people who wanted to make use of me, it became habitual ... I started categorising the types of folk who wanted to be "friends" and developed my personal friendship scale. I won't let people abuse my goodwill anymore. Harry and Ron are my best friends, but when we were growing up, I allowed them to abuse our friendship in ways that they wouldn't dare try now."

He leaned forward ... here was the crux of the matter. "Why?"

She gave him a hard look. "You should be able to answer that one from personal experience, Snape."

"The point goes to you, Granger. Go on, tell me about the scale."

She sighed. "There are the *Passing Acquaintances* ... the ones that you know from school, work and other activities. You know their faces and occasionally their names, but nothing that really matters. These types tend to be name-droppers and social climbers ... they have no right to claim many of the supposed friendships in their circles."

He didn't disagree. "Continue."

"Then we have the actual *Acquaintances* who are colleagues and associates from daily interactions. We actually know a bit about one another ... their lives, that they are intelligent or not, a few of their likes and dislikes. We have a shallow knowledge of who they are and the same can be said of them. We don't travel in the same circles often and we don't go out of our way to do one another favours."

"If that is the case, I should have rated *Acquaintance* from the start," he stated indignantly.

"Oh, no. You were a special case. You never let us into your head ... we only knew what you wanted the whole world to see. Even in the end, what you gave Harry was a calculated risk, and you gave that bit of yourself to him, not me." She looked at him, daring him to refute her.

Instead he asked, "So, what comes after *Acquaintance*?"

"*Associate* and *Colleague*. You interact with these people more intimately and actually get to know them a bit on a deeper level. A few of their dreams and fears. What makes them laugh. You allow them to use you on occasion and you do the same to them, but it's socially acceptable. You actually socialise with these types for the pleasure of it. You may or may not forgive this type a trespass."

"So, now I *almost* rate amongst these rare types," he mused.

"Almost. You have a way to go yet," she said, giving him a look he couldn't read. "Then we have the *Casual Friend*. We support one another, we know so much about each other, but we don't know the deepest desires, fears or dreams. They aren't the ones we go to for the most important things, but we share more of ourselves with them than most people. You are more willing to forgive their mistakes, but that won't stop you from cutting them off."

"You trust them, but only to a certain point," he stated.

"Yes, exactly. And that is the level where most of my friendships exist," she said, answering before he could ask.

"So, where does that leave Potter and Weasley? You have trusted them with your life and then some."

"They are *True Friends* and yes, that sounds sentimental, but there is truth to it. No matter what happens, we are still there for one another. I love them and they love me. We trust as implicitly as it is possible to do so. We know each other as well as we know ourselves." She looked at him for a moment more before pushing her empty plate aside and starting on her custard in silence.

Severus drank his glass of Firewhisky and contemplated the information the woman seated across from him had shared. She obviously valued his grudging assistance highly, because she'd given him a very intimate look into her psyche. Still, her explanation seemed incomplete ... it didn't explain the situation with Weasley. Sitting his glass down, he leaned forward.

"Would you care to tell me about your relationship with Weasley? You two have been on and off again for almost ten years. Even I was surprised that you didn't finally end up together."

She laughed. "Ron and I haven't been a couple since the second time we split eight years ago."

"And yet you two were perceived as such by almost everyone," he countered.

"Well almost everyone's perception was wrong. We had an open-ended, friends-with-benefits agreement."

He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. Taking a calming breath, he tried again. "What did you just say?"

"Oh, please! There is nothing wrong with your hearing," she snapped. "Good lord, I hope you're not another judgmental prude."

"Hardly," he replied, with recovered equanimity. "I prefer no-strings-attached alliances. So, exactly how did your arrangement work?"

She gave him a saucy grin. "All these questions, Mr Snape. Are you interested in giving me a go?"

Yes, he thought. However, Severus treated her to a blank stare and waited.

Her smile dimmed a bit, but she continued. "We lived separately, dated whomever we wanted and played escort to one another for public and family functions, but we only ever slept with each other. It kept things simple."

"And it kept you, in particular, from being exploited or hurt," he stated as he watched her bristle in response to his summation.

"It wasn't just about me. Even Ron finally got tired of the gold diggers and bogus paternity suits, so the situation was mutually beneficial. Now, did you invite me here to dissect my life or are we actually going to discuss the project?" she asked as the waiter returned to clear the table and set out the ever-refilling pot of coffee along with two cups and an assortment of biscuits and pastries.

"I believe I've succeeded in discomfiting you enough in recompense for my services." He wandlessly cast a privacy ward before continuing. "So, tell me, which additional parameters will you need to tighten up the estimate on the spell sequence I sent over?" he asked.

The next hour flew by as they easily traded information and became even more familiar with one another's thought processes.

Severus was actually a bit dismayed when he realised that he would have to end their discussion, but he did have other obligations to tend to. "I'd like to send you my revised sequence in the next day or so. Will it need to go via the clearing house or can I send it direct?"

"Send it direct ... I'll authorise it when I get back to the office," she replied as she gathered her things in preparation to leave. Looking at him, she tilted her head at an angle and chuckled. "You know, I really had a decent time this afternoon. I hadn't expected to. I'm looking forward to working with you directly."

He looked up from the bill he was signing and nodded. "I've found the time enjoyable as well. Just wait a moment and I will escort you to an Apparition point." Looking back at the parchment, he finished signing with a flourish before tapping it with his wand to send it to the Guild business office. Placing a gratuity on the table, he stood and escorted Granger out of the club.

As they exited, Granger motioned him nearer. "I don't mean to be difficult, but I'd rather head over to the Arithmancers' and Floo from there ... it's just a few doors down and the members know better than to bother me."

"I don't find you difficult. Your request makes my job easier. Lead on."

Granger nodded and led him to a building that reminded him of a Victorian-styled Exchequer's establishment. She spoke with the doorman before handing Severus a stylised coin. "This is a guest-chit. It's good until I tell them otherwise. It will only work for you. Come on through ... you can use the Floo here if you'd like."

They walked through a warm, wood-panelled entryway and turned down the first corridor on the right where three active Floo stations were located. They paused beside the nearest one.

Severus stepped into Granger's personal space, leaning over her with one hand propping him up against the wall. "I know I didn't answer you earlier, but I do find both you and your philosophy very attractive," he murmured.

She looked back at him with a wistful expression and sighed. "That pleases me more than you know, but there's one small problem. I will only ever sleep with a real friend. I think you, of all people, would understand why."

He did ... for her, it was all about trust, and that was something that she no longer gave lightly. It was something that he hardly ever gave at all. He placed his other hand on the wall and leaned in further. "Well, I managed to go from *nothing* to *almost colleague* in one afternoon."

She smiled a bit in response. "I'm thinking that you've managed to firmly advance to *colleague* at this point."

"*Colleague* won't get me very far, according to your rules," he whispered.

"But it is a fair start," she answered with a grin as she ducked under his arm and tossed a handful of powder into the Floo. Giving him a happy shrug, she called out her destination and whirled off to wherever.

Shaking his head, Severus pushed off the wall and reached into his cloak for his powder supply. It wasn't all that unusual for him to find himself sexually attracted to a female that he'd only spent a limited amount of time with. Normally, he wouldn't put much effort into what would amount to nothing more than a pleasurable dalliance, but Granger was truly interesting as an adult. He had written off the idea of friendships in the past, but currently, pursuing one with her seemed worth the effort. With a casual flick of his wrist, he tossed the powder down and headed to his office to work on the sequence they'd discussed. The sooner she had it in hand, the sooner he would have an excuse to meet with her again.

Part II

Chapter 3 of 5

In which an accord is reached.

Disclaimer: *looks around* Darn. Still not mine.

Part II

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The Coulson Project was the public name for the research backed by Potter and Malfoy for a better alternative to Wolfsbane potion, with the long-term goal of a cure for lycanthropy. At one time, it had run under a different Ministry-sourced name, but there were werewolves and even vampires that didn't want the project to succeed. Both groups of dissidents considered themselves a sovereign species and didn't want to be "cured" (the vampires were convinced that if lycanthropy was eradicated, it wouldn't

be much of a scientific leap to dealing with vampirism as well), so they'd attempted to destroy both the project and its early participants.

The original project was scrapped as a result, but it was privately revived a few years later under the name of a talented young Muggle-born Healer, Erik Coulson. He was publicly working on a better cure for Dragon Pox that dealt with the greenish skin and pockmarks that its victims suffered, along with a vaccination to finally eradicate the potentially fatal disease. That Coulson was also the magical geneticist who led the current research on lycanthropy was only known to the research leads. The public was pleased, and the radicals were unaware of Coulson's primary objective.

All of the current team worked individually and only passed their research via the clearing house that the Potter-Malfoy Trust supervised personally in order to lower security risks. Severus had only recently discovered that Granger was the lead Arithmancer when he'd written to Coulson and demanded that he be allowed to meet with the number-cruncher because it was no longer possible for him to work in a vacuum. He'd needed to be able to understand the mind behind the formulations and advice he was receiving. That unconventional, intuitive and creative mind had intrigued him and led him down several useful paths for several months, so initially, it had been a bit of a shock to acknowledge that the little swot he'd scorned as a professor was now his current muse.

As he settled in behind his desk to adjust the spell parameters and formulae, he replayed the discussion they'd had earlier. He could now understand why conversation and ideas had flown and meshed so easily ... they had got past all of the stumbling and awkwardness in the blind quite a while back and they were both well past the point of being intimidated by each other's mental acuity. Humming tunelessly, he penned a short note to go along with the calculations and set it aside. An hour later, he bundled everything into one of the special pouches that project participants used and took the short walk from his office to the atrium where his two messenger birds resided.

Severus' office was situated in a building he'd purchased with his settlement from the Ministry not too long after he'd officially resigned from Hogwarts. He sublet most of it, except for the top two levels. The top level, where his flat was situated, was an odd, U-shaped layout that accommodated the atrium. The work level held a public reception area, his storerooms, research library, office, and lab, and with the exception of the two-story indoor atrium and potions garden/messenger bird habitat that he'd designed himself, it was all rather utilitarian.

The ravens had been a housewarming gift and a peace offering of sorts from Minerva a few months after he'd been exonerated in the closed hearings conducted by the International Confederation of Wizards. He'd named them after Odin's birds in a fit of irony and created a naturalised stand using a small dead ash tree for much the same reason. One of the birds bounced forward along a branch and mantled aggressively as he approached it.

"Yes, Muninn, this is for the project, but I won't be using you today ... you have a tendency towards rudeness, and I need to entice a certain young lady." He gave the unruly bird a bit of raw gizzard to placate it as he approached its partner. "Now, Huginn, this goes directly to Hermione Granger and no one else. If anyone else attempts to take it from you, feel free to take his hand off. Be polite to her and wait for a response." He attached the pouch and fed the greedy bird a treat before sending it off.

Another hour passed before his messenger returned to find him hard at work in the lab that adjoined his office. He had confirmation ... she would be there in two days' time to present her adjusted calculations and assist with the associated trials. Pulling his notes with the three potion-related modifications he wanted to attempt that evening, he forced himself to set all other thought aside.

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Severus spent the next day fully immersed in studying the results of the previous night's efforts. One of the modifications was an outright failure, but there were two others that held a bit of promise. It was strange to realise that he was eager to share the progress with Granger and see what she made of it. Albus had been the last person with whom he'd ever willingly shared his work, so he hadn't actually realised that the lack of someone to share things with actually made a difference in his output and creativity. He'd already made copies of his working notes and the studies, experiments and trials he'd conducted in the past for Granger's use. Now he needed to finish setting things up for their meeting the next day, so he spent the remaining time setting up the trials and creating space in which she could observe and work.

He was very interested to see the visual Arithmancy protocols that she'd developed and patented for use by others in her field. Supposedly, it made cross-disciplinary projects such as theirs easier to track, with the ability to make theoretical changes on the fly in real-time. It was a very intriguing concept for a researcher of his calibre, and the knowledge that Granger was the developer of this made her even more attractive to his way of thinking. Sometimes, it was important to know what motivated one's libido, so even if he never managed to get her into his bed, she'd be a colleague worth cultivating. Keeping that fact in mind, he finished his preparations at the lab and returned to his flat to make an early night of it.

The next morning, Severus woke early and took the time to actually eat a decent-sized breakfast instead of his usual one of an egg, a slice of toast and coffee by adding a bowl of porridge along with bacon. He'd placed an order for sandwiches, cheese and fruit to be delivered to his office at one in the afternoon, but he knew that meant nothing. He was pretty certain that once they started working, he'd be too involved to stop until late in the afternoon at best. Heading back to his bedroom, he changed into a comfortable pair of trousers and a long sleeved button down before combing back his hair and putting on his boots. Taking note of the time, he grabbed an over-robe and slipped it on as he headed down to his office to wait for Granger's arrival. He'd given her direction to the private entrance that would take her through the atrium, so he grabbed a container of treats and headed there to feed his birds. He made a point of greeting and feeding them each morning, if possible, to keep them from becoming difficult.

He hadn't been long at his task when he felt Granger cross his wards.

"This is lovely!" she exclaimed as she slowly crossed the room and took in her surroundings. "Good morning."

"Thank you, and good morning to you, as well. Come closer and greet these two so they won't feel slighted. You've already met Huginn here," he said as he nodded towards the bird he was currently feeding, "so let me formally introduce you to Muninn."

The bird in question took flight and landed on his outstretched arm. Severus turned his hip to give her access to the treat bag.

"Oh, you didn't!" she said with a delighted laugh as she reached into the bag he indicated and pulled out a long biscuit made of bone meal, ground insects and vegetable product and fed it to the greedy raven. "Minerva was so pleased when Hagrid found these two for her and told us who they were for. No wonder she looked as if she'd eaten an earwax-flavoured Bertie's Bott's when I asked if you liked her gift."

"I sent her a framed picture of me with the birds here in front of the stand, listed their names, and signed it, 'Odin' in thanks."

She looked at the beautifully polished ash, rotating in place to follow its branches up to the floor above. "All of this blatant symbolism is just riddled with mixed messages. The poor woman only wanted to make peace with you." Throwing him an amused glance, she continued, "You are an evil man, Severus Snape."

Launching the raven back towards the stand, he smirked in response. "I realise that she wasn't meant to know where my true allegiance lay, and that she is sorry for the hell she and our other colleagues put me through that year, but that doesn't change what happened. At least we're on speaking terms now. I'm done here, so let's get to work, shall we?"

Granger quietly followed him as he locked away the bird treats in a specially warded cabinet. "I was forced to ward this closed with a custom release instead of the standard tap of a wand on the door. Those two were smart enough to make the correlation and managed to 'borrow' a neighbour's wand to open it themselves."

"That must have been embarrassing."

"It would have been if the party in question had realised it was missing to begin with. I made the little thieves return it and created wards to prevent them from bringing in any others. Now they understand that they can't come home if they have a wand and that the cabinet will only open for me. Corbies learn much faster than my former students."

"I'll take your word for it. What I really want to know is who created that stand for you?" she asked as they passed through his office and into the lab research library.

"I bartered with Ollivander. In exchange for recreating his ruined potions stock, he taught me the spells needed to harvest and finish the tree myself." Severus felt a

moment of satisfaction as he watched Granger's lips form a silent "oh." Moving into the lab proper, he pointed out a small alcove on the right. "There is a locker in there to hold anything you won't need, as well as a dressing area."

"Thank you, I'll only be a moment," she replied as she shrugged a small messenger bag from her shoulder and entered.

Severus walked over the stand that held his lab coat and exchanged his robe for the protective item. He'd been prepared to be chastised about baiting Minerva ... after all, the woman was her old Head of House and a good friend, but she'd only been amused by his cutting sense of humour. Granger had caught on straight away to the nuances, like the fact that his birds' names, Huginn and Muninn, meant 'Thought' and 'Memory'. She apparently was familiar with Odin's name as well, which meant 'Fury', along with his role of having sacrificed himself to give knowledge to Man and other related details. It was a welcome change to just be accepted instead of censured for expressing his feelings. He looked up to find Granger watching him carefully. She now wore low-heeled dragon hide boots and a coat similar to his own over trousers and a high-collared shirt. She also carried a curiously designed zippered binder.

He walked towards the workstation he'd set up for her the night before and motioned her over. "I hope that this space meets with your requirements. I've set this up so that you have a direct line of observation to the tests I'll conduct."

"I was prepared to just sit or stand off to the side and attempt to stay out of your way. That's what I'm normally forced to do. This is very generous of you," she replied as she indicated the comfortable and functional space he'd provided.

"Indeed. You will also find a copy of all of my notes and results, along with the trial plans for today."

Taking a seat, Granger unzipped her binder and flipped it open. "Will it distract you if I run the visual equations in the air, about here?" she enquired, pointing to a space just in front of his dedicated work area.

"I've never seen Visual Arithmancy at work," he replied diffidently. "I'd rather you demonstrate for me before I make a decision."

"All right then. This will only take a moment. I'll just put up the original spell sequence and walk you through the revisions that I sent earlier. That way, you'll recognise what's happening without a lot of unnecessary input from me. I was told that you can follow just fine but find the actual process of making the calculations tedious," she stated cautiously.

"You were informed correctly." Pulling up a chair, he made himself comfortable. With a casual wave of his hand he said, "I'm ready," and watched as Granger tapped her wand on a page in the binder. The air in front of them dimmed, and the spell sequence danced before them. He turned forward in his chair to give it his undivided attention.

It was a glowing three-dimensional blue that was reminiscent of the Bluebell flames she'd favoured as a student. As he watched, she replaced runic symbols and numeric representations until the formula behaved as if it were partly sentient, with colours changing and pulsing in time to her movements. He could feel the magic involved tangibly, almost as if it were holding its breath ... and when she figured in the last of the parameters he'd requested, the whole thing seemed to flicker with flame as it resolved with a mental sigh. It was elegant and functional and wondrous. He was speechless. He hadn't been prepared to be exposed so intimately to her magic.

"Go ahead and say it ... I know it's a bit showy ... but I desperately needed to put the magic back in magic after everything that went on. I can mostly tone down the more distracting visuals while we're working, but sometimes the magic picks up on my joy. I really love Arithmancy."

Severus resolutely kept his back to her as he worked to compose himself. "I can see that you do. It would probably be best if there were fewer pyrotechnics when we blend the spell sequences with actual potions ... I need to be able to see the colours unadulterated."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," she responded cheerfully. "I only use full visual mode for practical theory. I've got a two-dimensional basic mode for cross-disciplinary work. It was just that you'd never seen it, and I wanted to show it to you completely."

You've shown me more than you know Running his index finger along his lower lip, Severus made a decision. "Right, then. Let's use the basic mode for now and go back to full visual a bit later when we start changing things. Do you have values worked out for everything we'll use today?" Turning, he watched her flip to a different portion of her binder.

"I've got a concordance that I've created, along with the one that the Masters at the guild update monthly. If we need the values for anything that isn't in one of those, I can work it up as we go. Good enough?"

"Yes." Standing up from his chair, he walked over to the first trial. "Let's begin."

It was interesting to note that the basic mode was as practical and analytical as one could want, but instead, he found himself left cold by its very practicality. He preferred the warmth of the more visceral mode.

As predicted, they ended up working nonstop until almost four in the afternoon.

"We need to take a break and eat. I've ordered sandwiches in. Bring your binder, and we can continue the theoretical work," he said as he removed his lab coat and hung it on the stand before stepping into his office to remove the stasis charm from the serving platter.

When they'd made themselves comfortable at the table, Severus slid closer to take a look at the binder that Granger worked from. "Exactly how does this work? From what I can see, it's much more than just an overhead projection tool."

Granger pushed her plate aside and leaned in closer. "Currently, the binder is keyed to me, very much like my wand. It can work without that feature being activated, but it's not as efficient ... and, before you ask, it requires my fingerprint."

"So, more than one person can use the device?"

"Yes, but so far, everyone prefers to have their own." She glanced at him sideways and sighed before continuing. "I need to ask you what probably amounts to a stupid question about the focus of research on lycanthropy."

Nodding his head in assent, he noticed that she seemed to be very hesitant to continue. "Go on. Ask."

Taking a deep breath, she idly flipped a page in her binder before responding. "Why is almost all of the research lunar-based? We're dealing with a fixed twenty-eight-day cycle that just happens to coincide with the full moon. I've got a twenty-eight-day cycle and the moon has nothing to do with it, even if it does make me want to kill at times ... it's glandular. Why aren't we looking into glandular causation? Werewolves will change every twenty-eight days, even if they aren't exposed to moonrise, according to the studies that were done last year when researchers Portkeyed the subjects about in order to avoid the actual influence of moonrise. Every last subject turned during the time of moonrise in their native hemisphere when deprived of the actual event. I know that magic doesn't always follow logic. Is there something that I'm missing because I'm a Muggle-born?"

"You've never asked anyone this?"

"No."

"I'm honoured."

And he was. She was young, Muggle-born and a newcomer to the field. She hadn't been about long enough to chance asking what she thought might be obvious to everyone else, but she'd taken the risk with him. Taking his time, he mentally ran through everything he knew about lycanthropy and came up with nothing to refute her

query.

"That was not a stupid question," he admitted slowly, drawing out the words as he continued to consider the concept ... and she was off like a shot.

"Oh, thank you! I'd wanted to throw in my thoughts on this for ages. If we can find proof of a change in the chemistry of the blood, with a build-up of whatever chemical or cells over the twenty-eight-day cycle, with the full moon possibly affecting the earth's gravitational field as the primary trigger ..."

"*Stop*," he ordered, raising his hand abruptly as he watched her visibly rein in all of her eagerness to listen to what he had to say. "You've obviously written your theories out and created models to support your ideas."

She took a breath to answer, and he raised his hand again. "Not a word ...*please*. First we eat and complete the work we've started today." He watched as she forcibly bit back whatever it was that strained to pass her lips and hid the smile that threatened his own. "That should only take another hour or so. *Then* you will show me what you have, and we'll see if there's enough there to pull in Coulson," he stated, sitting back in his chair to gauge her response.

"All right, I can do it that way," she said, the excitement rolling off her in waves. "Will just you let me show you ..."

He couldn't help it, he laughed. Hidden beneath Granger's otherwise sophisticated, scholarly exterior was the eleven year-old, hand-waving swot that had almost levitated off her seat in her eagerness to answer during that first Potions class.

"It's not that funny," she said with a frown as she sat back and favoured him with a cautious look.

"Oh, yes, it is," he gasped as he tried to regain his breath. "It's first day Potions all over again, without the bushy hair. You were actually quivering." He watched as she ducked her head in response in an attempt to hide the smile that was making its way to her face.

"I was not," she muttered, which only served to set him off again.

"Okay, fine. You win!" she said with a laugh of her own. "Can we just get on with things?"

"Yes. Now eat."

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Severus couldn't sleep. It didn't surprise him when it took the rest of the evening to finish the initial lab work or that they worked well into the night looking over the premise of Granger's theory. It didn't cause him to think twice about how he'd ended up revising his own schedule to fit hers, so that they could spend the next few weeks focussing on the idea. The fact that they'd developed a routine over the following days didn't register either. It was the realisation that he was freely sharing ideas and thoughts that was keeping him awake about a week into his new schedule. Flipping onto his back and pulling the covers closer, he allowed his mind to wander back to the conversation they'd had two nights ago.

"You know, this is getting to be a bit much ... the whole name thing," she said sharply as she leaned against her workstation in frustration.

"Well, what would you like me to do about it?" Severus responded without looking up from the notes he was currently writing.

"See? That's exactly what I mean," she snapped as she walked across the room and planted her elbows in front of him, leaning into his space. "You either don't use my name at all or you resort to calling me Granger as if it's major concession on your part."

With a weary sigh, he looked up from his work. "Well, Granger, that's your name."

"Last time I checked, my parents named me, Hermione."

"You call me Snape."

"Only because you haven't given leave for anything more," she replied with a smirk.

"Neither have you."

"Call me, Hermione," she'd whispered softly as she turned and went back to her own work.

Severus let a calculated amount of time pass before he spoke. "Hermione."

"Yes?"

"Just trying it out. Carry on."

She'd shrugged and smiled as she'd turned her attention back to her own notes, not even bringing up the fact that he'd not reciprocated in allowing her use of his given name. He really liked that about her. She didn't push ... she was willing to wait until he felt comfortable enough to give her that permission. She understood that it wasn't a slight, which many others automatically assumed. Apparently, he had a friendship scale as well, and use of his first name was a key part of it.

He hadn't shared like this since he and Lily were children speculating about all things magical before attending Hogwarts and he wasn't entirely certain how he felt about it. It had taken him enough time after the war to put everything "Lily" behind him now that his duty was done, so he wasn't exactly thrilled with the fact that Granger ... no, *Hermione* ... was stirring up the associations without even trying. Rolling back to his side, he slipped into a meditative state. Just before he crossed over into true sleep, he wondered where he stood on her scale now.

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About the third week in, they'd managed to finalise the proposal and send it off to Coulson. It had taken less than a day to receive a response, and now they were currently awaiting his arrival in Severus' office. He'd never met the man in person, but he already appreciated the fact that Coulson hadn't pulled the "project lead" card and made them come to him. That said, Severus had given Coulson the direction to his official entry where Robert, his receptionist, would greet Coulson and lead him back instead of greeting the man personally as he'd done with Hermione.

Looking over at his partner, he noticed that she was calmly working on her latest word search magazine instead of obsessing over last-minute details the way she would have as a student. She'd also dressed the same as any other working day, so either she'd matured enough to become secure with who she was, or she'd already met Coulson and didn't feel as if she needed to impress him further ... or both, for that matter.

"Hermione, have you actually met our illustrious project lead before? I've only ever corresponded with him, and only then regarding the project."

Giving him a mischievous grin as she looked up from her puzzle, she replied, "Yes, I have. Aren't you leaving the reconnaissance a bit late?"

He snorted in response. "Oh, I've done my homework ... I know all of his background. Since Draco is the only person I speak with regularly who has dealt with him personally, the impression I have is rather one-sided at this point." He gave her an expectant look.

"Fine, I'll spill. I met him when he came to personally talk me out of taking the teacher-research position at Salem to contract with his research group instead."

"You were seriously looking to leave Britain?"

"I told you, things were pretty bad for a while. I didn't really have a connection with my parents at that point either. So, after the dust settled and it wouldn't look like I was running away, I'd planned to relocate, but he was pretty persuasive and offered me a much more attractive deal."

"I hope you realise you owe him your sanity. His interference is almost worthy of a Life-Debt. I'm already starting to like him."

"Very funny, Mr Snape."

He gave her a pensive look before speaking. "It's Severus."

Before she could respond his receptionist arrived with Coulson in tow. He was not what Severus had expected. The man who stepped forward to greet them did not fit the mental profile that he'd drawn up based upon the work they'd shared. With his direct assessing gaze, Coulson could easily pass as a member of the Royal Navy's Special Boat Service or a Hit Wizard. He moved with an economy of motion that seemed to reinforce that impression. Ethnically, he was predominantly Greek, with an olive complexion, cropped dark dirty blond hair and startling blue eyes. He was dressed professionally in a collared button down, trousers and a dragon-hide lab coat, which was standard for those in his field; however, nothing about him said Healer, researcher or British wizard. Severus knew him to be all of those things, and it was becoming increasingly clear as to why Draco rapidly changed the subject whenever he'd asked about the man.

"Miss Granger, it's good to see you again," Coulson stated in a business-like manner. Turning to Severus, he smiled slightly. "Master Snape, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I have information that will most likely please both you and Miss Granger."

"Good to hear that, and it's just Snape."

"Coulson will do, as well ... I get enough of 'Healer' at university."

"You have samples?" Hermione asked as she attempted to contain her excitement. Severus and Coulson smiled.

"I have that and much more," Coulson responded, gesturing to his carry-case. "If we can move this discussion to the lab?" he enquired, looking to Snape for confirmation.

Hermione streaked across the office, leaving the two men in her wake.

"Is she always like this?" Coulson asked casually as he watched her pass through the doorway.

It surprised Severus that he actually knew her well enough now to answer that question honestly. "For the most part, yes," he replied softly as he led the slightly taller man through his office to the lab.

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Sometimes, research was a slow, dragging thing that made one want to cast a quick *Incendio* and storm off in a strop. This was not one of those times. It was now the beginning of October, and three weeks had passed since Coulson had gifted them with more knowledge and materials than they knew what to do with. Instead of being overwhelmed, they were making headway at a frightening speed. Severus was almost certain that they were nearing a breakthrough of some sort, and it was hard to call a stop to the work each night. But stop they had, and now he was in bed, engaged in what was fast becoming his favourite nightly monologue: thoughts on his rapidly growing friendship with Hermione.

She brought fresh coffee and pastries each morning to go with the fruit, eggs, meat or porridge he prepared and they would breakfast in his office. They mostly discussed the project, but here and there, little bits of their daily lives managed to slip in as well. He knew that she couldn't meet with him on Sundays because that was her family day ... with either her parents or at the Burrow. She knew that he met Minerva for breakfast every third Saturday. He recognised that when she abruptly stopped what she was doing and went to spend time in the atrium, he'd either been too abrasive, or she needed to let her mind slow down. She understood that when he held his hand up for silence, he was usually chasing a thought and left him to it without further questioning. They also spoke more of what made the both of them tick, along with dissecting past as well as current events.

He found that he was starting to depend on their friendship, and in the back of his mind, that thought continued to send up red sparks of warning. He was obsessive by nature, so he wasn't quite certain where one drew the line for a healthy association. Closing his eyes, he pulled up a memory from that afternoon.

Three quarters of the lab's air space glowed with complex formulae in full visual Arithmancy mode. Hermione was attempting to create the values needed to plug in the latest sample results and had failed to make the sub-equations balance for the sixth consecutive time. As she paced up and down the lab preparing for yet another attempt, he walked over to her workstation and gently closed her binder, cancelling the display in an abrupt shower of light.

She turned and stormed over to him. "Why did you do that? I needed to run an error-checking sequence and you had no ..."

He held up a hand and smirked when she huffed in frustration. Stepping closer, he reached out and took her hand, and proceeded to drag her to the atrium where he supplied her with treats for the ravens before returning to his own work. It was close to an hour before she returned.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

*"I just wanted to let you know that you've officially advanced to **Friend**, because only a real friend would risk getting hexed for interrupting me like that."*

He shrugged in response. "You needed to stop. I saw where the numerical imbalance was on your third try, and we both realise that you wouldn't have taken kindly to my ungentle style of correction by the sixth. It was purely a matter of self-preservation."

She wandered the perimeter of the lab to her workstation and flopped inelegantly into her chair before opening the binder. "So, where's the problem? I'm not in the mood to hunt it down at this point," she muttered as she flung the sequences back up from the page, causing them to spark and fluctuate before settling.

Ignoring her display of pique, he crossed his arms before answering, "You need to look at the twenty-third sub-equation. The value for aconite is transposed and located before Gebo, when you distinctly told me it needed to be placed after." He watched as she tracked the equation in question and rapidly made the changes, feeling the greater sequence resolve as a result.

With an exaggerated sigh, she turned to him. "I know it's a bit early, but I think I'd better leave. I have something I'd like to try with you, but I need a clear head for it. Thank you again for stepping in like that, Severus. Septima was the last to do that for me, and she doesn't count, because she was my mentor."

It was both humbling and gratifying to know that he did count in a way that mattered ... to be appreciated just for being himself. It was heady.

Severus opened his eyes, letting go of the memory and rolled onto his side. This was turning into a nightly ritual, which was more than bothersome because he hadn't needed to habitually engage in this type of mental review since the end of the war. He really needed to start compartmentalising his feelings again before he made a fool of

himself. Hermione had mentioned needing a clear head for whatever she had planned in the morning, so he found himself actively, aggressively clearing his mind for the first time in years before drifting off to sleep.

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Severus sat next to Hermione as she opened her binder and flipped about midway through it before she stopped. "I want to add you to my binder."

"Explain."

Leaning forward on her elbows, she looked down at the page before looking back up at him. "I want to try joint Arithmancy. You understand how I build my calculations, and I have become sufficiently familiar with the way you craft a spell sequence. I think the breakthrough we're looking for can only be accomplished jointly. Are you willing to try?"

"This is a form of joint casting?"

"Yes, in all the essentials, and I trust you enough. Do you trust me?"

And that was the crux of the situation. "For the moment, yes. Do not make me regret my decision."

Biting her lower lip, she held out her hand. "I'll need to prick your index finger, just enough to create a fingerprint next to this sequence here," she said as she indicated the spot on the parchment.

"I thought you said it only required a print?" He wasn't opposed to using such a small amount blood, but he wanted to hear what she had to say.

"I'm able to make intuitive leaps and calculations with a higher level of accuracy with my signature bonded to the programming sequence by blood. Normally, I work without the aid, but for what I want to attempt today, it is more likely to work. We can do this with saliva or a dry print, but we will have to work all that much harder to mesh our signatures ... along with losing the benefit of the artefact taking the backlash of any spell work that goes awry."

He pulled the binder closer and looked over the sequence to ensure that it was a one-use spell array and was pleased to note that not only was it one-use, it also required a willing donor and would end today when their joint casting was complete. He held his hand out over the binder to signal his willingness, and Hermione quickly tapped her wand to his finger to draw the tiny amount of blood to the surface before directing him to place his finger down on the parchment in the box at the end of the sequence. She completed the sequence by adding her own print next to his, and they both disappeared.

"So, why have we brought out the big guns, so to speak?" he asked as she flipped to the last study they'd processed.

"Coulson sent me the information on the mitochondria we traced with that spell of yours. The little buggers seem to be the culprits ... they build up over the twenty-eight-day period, rapidly reproduce as soon as moonrise hits, and die off en masse at moonset. He's given us a set of possible proteins that might cause the reproduction to begin with," she said, in a rush. "We need to run the probabilities to see if we can isolate the catalyst."

Pushing back in his chair, Severus looked up at nothing. If they were able to isolate the catalyst, he could possibly create a potion, spell or both if needed to arrest the reproduction of the rogue cells. There was a good probability that the subject needed a threshold amount of cells in order for moonrise to trigger physical change, otherwise partially infected victims like Bill Weasley would turn as well. It wouldn't cure the subject, but they would be that much closer to finding a solution.

Sitting forward, he looked at Hermione, studied her. She hadn't needed to bring him in on this bit of it at all. It might take her longer alone, but he was more than confident that she would arrive at whatever conclusion there was without his input. Most researchers would have broken off at this point, done the work and kept the acclaim, if any, for their selves. Lily had done as much when they were students in Potions, competing for the top rank for their year. And here he was again, making comparisons where he shouldn't. Childhood friendships ran a greater risk of being shallow, and even Potter and Hermione had competed in Potions during their sixth year because of his book.

Time to stop wool-gathering.

"Did Coulson include samples from victims such as Weasley? We know that he suffers from increased aggression without transformation. We need to compare the levels."

Tapping a portion of the parchment page, Hermione put the information up for him to see.

"Did you already have this from before?" he asked.

"No, I worked it up over the last few days when we knocked off."

"I can see that we'll be having a discussion about actually knocking off and getting some rest. That's why you made such a dunderheaded error yesterday."

"You've caught me out," she admitted with a sheepish grin. "I did go home and sleep for today's work. Are you ready?"

oOOOoOo

It took an additional three days to narrow things down to the point of needing to run a newly crafted spell sequence. "I need to stop here and test what I've got before we can add the information to the matrix, Hermione."

Looking over her shoulder, she shook her head. "We can run the sequence via the binder. I've modified it for your spellcrafting. We can test it virtually and see if it pans out. The binder will transfer the information when you've approved the sequence."

"I thought this was just for Arithmancy?" Lifting the object in question, it was interesting to note that she seemed rather diffident about providing an explanation.

"I've been working on this prototype for a while. I'm average when it comes to spell creation, so I can't really push the boundaries of the binder. I was hoping you wouldn't mind giving it a go," she stated carefully.

Ah, she did have a need for my participation, but it was still benevolent "What level of spell work have you tested?"

"Level Nine simulations that had already been vetted. I even begged one with five intentional errors to test for backlash."

"And if we blow up your precious binder?"

"I've got two spares with all of the work backed up ... this is the only Spellcraftre's prototype, the others are strictly Arithmancy. It won't change anything important."

That was all he needed to know. "This is a Level Six sequence for the record." And with a flourish, he began *Given certain circumstances, he had just as little restraint as she did.*

oOOOoOo

"Oh, good lord, Severus. Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" Hermione whispered, nine hours later. He watched her stare about in wonder, a trembling hand pressed to her lips as she turned in a circle to observe the simulation of spell-sequence and potion as they interacted with the virtual cell samples. The cells were actively reduced by the onset of moonrise, entering a cycle of apoptosis as rapidly as they formed, due to a combination of an enzyme to accelerate and shorten the target cell's life-cycle,

along with the lowering of the target protein they'd isolated earlier.

Turning abruptly, she activated a sequence that showed the visual mark-up of the Arithmancy involved, including all the data and timing notation needed for live testing before saving everything. He continued to watch her as she silently walked over to where he stood and looked up at him, unshed tears shining in her eyes.

"Changing the sequence to trigger at moonrise was the key, and we wouldn't have discovered that anytime soon with normal methods," he murmured. "Every other sequencing variation would either kill off or damage the subject, and it would have taken months of testing. Your prototype is astounding, Hermione."

It was beautiful, empowering. So was she. Reaching out, he trailed his fingers gently along her jaw line and made a decision. Slipping his hand behind her head, he kissed her, gently at first, and then with increasing need as she kissed him back. He stepped in and pulled her closer as he felt her arms come up around him. It felt magical. He was feeling her emotions and desires as if they were his own, and if he hadn't had such a strong sense of self, he would have easily lost himself to it. It was magical. Needless to say, it wasn't one of the intended uses for the binder. With a frustrated groan, he broke off and gently pushed her back. "I'm sorry ... we're still linked. I do want you, though."

She reached up and gently ran a finger down his nose and looked away with a sigh. "How could I miss that with all of the additional feedback," she said. "Give me five minutes. This isn't over."

It took her less than five minutes to shut down the spell work and break the link, leaving them both all the more desperate.

"Severus, if we do this ..."

"I know. No one-offs. Think of this as a test-run for sexual compatibility," he replied gently.

"You agree to my terms? I can't do a relationship right now."

"And if you'll recall ... I don't want one."

"Good. My place. I have a Portkey."

He almost told her that his flat was just upstairs but suddenly realised he wasn't ready to share that bit of himself, so he said, "From my office" and grabbed her hand. They made their way through the lab, and as soon as they crossed the threshold, Hermione fished a platinum chain with a stylised Hogwarts pendant from beneath her shirt and held it out to him. With a whispered *Portus*, they were gone.

Severus didn't bother to take in much of his surroundings, although he did get an impression of openness and light before he was summarily pushed onto a bed and kissed to within an inch of his life. Somewhere during the process, they managed to disrobe, and soon, all he could do was *feel*. It really had been too long. Focussing all of his attention on Hermione, he took the lead back and proceeded to simply indulge ... in her mouth, her neck, the lovely tits that pushed up as he licked a path down her throat... and then he was startled to find himself on his back.

"I really, really appreciate the attention and that particular skill set," she said as she grabbed his cock and slid onto it with a happy sigh, "but right now, a thorough fucking is what I want."

Severus didn't argue the point. If that was what she wanted, he was more than up to providing it.

Severus decided that the most interesting thing about sex with a real friend, someone you actually care about, was the intimacy of it. There was an added level of trust that lent a different quality to the act that can't be quantified, and that was something that he hadn't been aware he'd been missing until now. After satisfying their initial, heated desires, they'd taken time to explore and find out what the other liked ... there was a generosity involved that he hadn't expected coupled with just the right amount of greed to keep things interesting. The other benefit was the fact that he wasn't tossed out on his ear as soon as they were done with one another.

"You can stay if you like. Either here, or there's a bed in the spare room if you'd be more comfortable with that arrangement," Hermione said as she rolled over to look at him.

"I'll stay for a bit, but I need to head home this time."

"Ah, then I've passed your compatibility test," she replied playfully, rolling closer in order to nibble his earlobe.

"I don't think I'll be giving you up any time in the near future," he said with a soft groan. "I do need to leave here before daybreak." He pulled her closer, in direct contradiction to his words.

"Mmm, that's perfect... yes, just like that," she hissed as she slid up and down his body, making certain he knew she enjoyed the friction. "I know my timing is a bit crap, but I need to know if you're up for escort duty in the near future," she said, letting one of her hands wander south.

Severus was tempted to say no, but he wanted her to know that he'd uphold his end of the agreement fully. "Where am I escorting you and when?" he asked as she slid a lazy finger along his perineum, causing his breath to hitch.

"Ron and Marissa's reception next Friday. I'll send you the details," she replied as her fingers continued to wander along the length of him.

"You don't want much at all, do you?" he replied sarcastically.

"Actually, I do. I was wondering if you were up for another go before you head out."

With a growl, Severus showed the little manipulative witch just what he was up for.

oOOOoOo

Severus was slightly nervous the next morning because he wasn't quite certain if the way they worked would be affected by their new status as lovers. He needn't have worried. Hermione showed up at the office at the usual time, armed with fresh coffee and their favourite pastries. There were no awkward hugs or kisses on the cheek to deal with.

They went about the rest of their day in the usual fashion and managed to tidy up all of their findings and ship them off to Coulson for further instructions. If it weren't for the rather heated look she gave him as she pulled the Portkey from beneath her shirt when they were finished, he'd almost swear that he'd hallucinated the night before. It was nice to know that they were on the same page: they had a backlog of sexual encounters to make up for, and there was no time like the present to deal with it.

Part III

Chapter 4 of 5

In which the obvious is not quite so when it comes to communication.

Part III

□

Next Friday arrived much sooner than Severus would have liked. Standing in front of his mirror, he attached cufflinks to the shirt sleeves of one of his nicer sets of dress robes and sighed. It was only a reception with people who were mostly neutral to his presence, although a very few would actually be glad to see him. Hermione had assured him that they would make the rounds and leave as soon as it was politic to do so. This really was something he'd only consider doing for a good friend ... agreement or not. Casting a quick *Tempus*, he grabbed his cloak and headed down to the atrium where they had agreed to meet.

Hermione was already there. She wore a sleeveless, form-fitting set of warm, sable-coloured velvet robes that had a sweetheart neckline, an empire waist and a skirt that flared at the knee and fell softly to the floor. The robes were accessorised with matching fingerless opera gloves, along with an antique gold silk wrap around her bare shoulders. Her hair was pulled up in a stylish up-do with a trail of silky curls at the base of her neck. The deep yellow beryl teardrop earrings, necklace and ring set in white gold completed the ensemble.

"Will I do?" she asked with a sultry smile.

"I suppose it won't be a hardship to be seen with you," he replied flatly, his mouth quirking at the corners as he suppressed a smile.

The ravens set up a commotion in response.

"I don't think they like your attitude, Mr Snape."

"That's only because you've shamelessly spoiled them," he said, giving them an evil glare as he took her arm. "Let's leave the critics behind, shall we?"

"By all means, yes!" she said with a laugh as they made their way to the Apparition point just outside the building. Severus Disillusioned them before Apparating them both.

oOOOOo

When they arrived at the restaurant, they cancelled the spell and followed the sign to the room where the reception was being held. Arthur Weasley met them at the door.

"Hermione, you look lovely tonight. And . . . Severus, so pleased to see you! Come in, come in," he said with a joviality that would normally have made Severus' teeth ache, but Arthur was one of the few people he respected.

"Molly's just over there," Arthur said, waving distractedly as more guests arrived, "and the couple of the hour is at the head table. Go say hello."

Severus reached out and shook his hand, "We will, Arthur. It's good to see you again," he said as he guided Hermione away towards the head table.

"I never knew you were on good terms with Arthur," she remarked.

"He was a reliable informant for us at the Ministry, even when it was no longer safe for him to work there, and he still managed to do a good job of raising that horde. He also never treated me as shoddily as others tended to. He's an easy man to respect," Severus finished as they reached their destination.

Ron pulled Hermione into a warm hug and then passed her off to Marissa before shaking Snape's hand in greeting. "Good to see you, sir."

Severus gestured towards Marissa. "Thank you. If you would be so kind as to introduce the new Mrs Weasley?"

"Oh, sure. Marissa, sweetheart, this is Mr Severus Snape, our former professor. He taught us Potions and Defence at Hogwarts," Ron said by way of introduction.

"A pleasure to meet you finally, Mr Snape," Marissa replied warmly.

"Congratulations to you. Mr Weasley was a slow starter, but he managed to do well in the end."

"Yes, I did," he replied with a lopsided grin as he turned to Hermione. "So, you and Snape?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she said with a happy shrug.

"Wow." Turning to Severus, Ron stated, "We both know that she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself, yes?"

Not knowing where this was going, Severus answered carefully. "Yes...?"

Ron nodded. "Glad to hear that. Now I'm personally letting you know that she's your responsibility," he said firmly.

"Hey!" Hermione said indignantly.

"I'm speaking with Snape. Now hush," he instructed her. "Well, Snape?"

"Understood, Weasley."

"Good to know we're on the same page here." Turning back to Hermione, Ron continued. "You had something to say?"

"Oh, no, I'll just let you men do whatever it is you think you need to do," she replied flippantly.

"And there is the surly witch I know and love. See what you saved me from, Marissa?" he said with a laugh, waggling his eyebrows comically in response.

Hermione turned to Severus and sighed. "I think it's time we made the rounds before I end up punching him."

"I agree. Once again, it was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs Weasley." Turning to Ron, he raised an eyebrow in irony and said, "Take good care of her."

Ron pulled his wife to him and said, "I plan on it. Have a good evening, sir."

Severus pulled Hermione to him and led her about for a half hour, briefly greeting those in attendance whom he knew while allowing her to spend time with her acquaintances. They spent another twenty minutes in conversation with Molly and Minerva before he suggested that they make their way over to the Potters.

"I can go alone if you'd like. I know you and Ginny aren't exactly on speaking terms," Hermione said as they crossed the room.

"I'm fine with Ginevra. I've made my peace with what I had to do as Headmaster to protect them quite some time ago. I refuse to allow the situation to hold power over me any longer," he replied.

"Hermione, you look wonderful," Ginny exclaimed, giving her a hug before looking over at Severus. "Tell me you're not here with Snape," she continued with a slight frown.

"I am, so like it or lump it," Hermione responded coolly, stepping closer to the man in question.

"What's not to like?" Ginny responded with irony as she turned to Severus. "Snape, I'm surprised to see you here," she said with false politeness.

"So am I, Mrs Potter," he responded mildly, with a faint smile on his lips, causing her to blink in consternation.

She gave Severus a hostile glare before turning to Harry. "I think I'll go refresh our punch," she stated, grabbing their cups before quickly heading away from them.

Harry sighed. "It's good to see you, Snape."

"Likewise," he replied softly.

Harry nodded absently as he watched his wife's retreating form, his concern visible in his expression before turning to Hermione. Holding out his arms he said, "Come here and give us a hug ... you never could do things the easy way."

"No, but I have to warn you that you'll be seeing quite a bit more of Severus in the future," she replied, hugging him back.

Looking merrily over Hermione's shoulder at Snape, Harry said, "Thank you!" grinning as he pushed Hermione back to look her in the eye. "George owes me twenty Galleons."

"You were betting on us, Potter?" Severus asked, the warning clear in his voice.

"No ... I was betting on Hermione and I said that if she fell, it would be for someone older."

"I didn't *fall* ... we have an arrangement," Hermione retorted with a sniff.

"Oh, in that case, he only owes me ten."

"Harry!"

"All right, I'll stop," he replied solemnly.

Turning to Severus, he said, "In all sincerity, I'm pleased for the both of you." Quickly canvassing the room, he sobered. "Look, Ginny is making her way back ..."

Severus looked past Harry and spoke. "Draco and Astoria have just made their fashionably late entrance. I'm going to go have a quiet word with them, if you'll join me when you've finished here, Hermione?" tacitly implying that there was no need for her to rush off.

She took his hand and squeezed it gently in response. "All right, I'll see you in a few moments," she answered as Severus nodded to Harry and excused himself.

oOOOoOo

Severus absent-mindedly listened to Draco as he watched Hermione interact with the Potters. In a way, he was glad that the young man had married Ginevra, regardless of the obvious associative issues. Ginevra was so completely unlike Lily that it had made things easy in the end, and Harry had proved over and over again that he was nothing like his sire. He hadn't lied to Hermione when he'd said that he'd made peace with his actions. But like Ginevra, sometimes moving on was easier said than done.

"Severus, who are you here with? I'd meant to ask," Astoria said curiously as she scanned the room.

He nodded in the direction of the young woman approaching him with a smile. "Hermione Granger asked me to escort her, and I decided that it couldn't hurt to oblige her."

"How very intriguing," she responded, giving him an eager look.

"I know the two of you are currently working together," Draco stated, "but there's more to it than that."

"There always is," Severus replied cryptically as Hermione joined him. "Hermione, you know Draco, of course. Have you had the opportunity to meet his lovely wife, Astoria?"

"No. We don't normally travel in the same circles, although I do support a few of the charities she manages," she said, turning to Astoria with a smile. "It's good to meet you."

"A pleasure," Astoria responded warmly. "Severus was just explaining that he's on escort duty tonight."

"Yes, we're colleagues, and he was kind enough to help me out, as well as to provide me with an excuse to leave the festivities a bit early."

Severus smiled inwardly as he watched Astoria wilt. She still wasn't getting the answers she wanted. "Speaking of leaving ... this would be a good time for us to do so. Everyone will be focused on these two as they well-wish the happy couple."

"I'm ready to go," Hermione stated. "Draco, it was good to see you again, and Astoria, I'll contact you soon. I want to discuss the Hogwarts Scholarship Fund with you. As much as I love Minerva, she's still Headmistress and has her agenda."

"Oh, I'd appreciate that," Astoria replied, her face lighting up with pleasure.

Severus spoke up before Astoria could use the opening. "Draco, I'll contact you later about the contract with Longbottom. For now, I wish you both a good evening."

Draco took the hint and gently steered his wife towards the head table.

"That's that," Hermione said brightly as they made their way towards the restaurant entrance.

"Yes, and I want you to know that I was very pleased with the way you handled Astoria. She's just as nosy as most of her ilk, but she isn't a gossip. She tends to use the information to decide what leverage she can use to interest people in her charities."

"That's good to know," Hermione replied. "You do realise that we've managed to let everyone who matters see us together. Things should be simple from this point forward."

"You mean I don't have to suffer through a meet-the-parents scenario," he said with a chuckle as they stepped into the alcove set aside for Apparating.

"Absolutely not. I don't anticipate them hosting anything that would require me to bring an escort, and the less they know about my activities the better. Mum sees me with a man and starts hinting about marriage and grandchildren," she said with a shudder. Reaching into the sleeve of her glove, she pulled out her Portkey and dangled it in front of Severus' nose. "I think we deserve a reward for good behaviour."

Severus could only agree as he reached out and grasped the pendant with a smile.

oOO0OOo

Things settled down after that evening. They were moving firmly into the Christmas holidays, and Severus still worked with Hermione at least once a week. She informed him that Coulson needed her talents more often than not due to the new focus of the project, and her intermittent absence gave him time to craft the actual potion for the upcoming trials without distraction.

It was novel to have a breakfast partner during the work week, but he found that he still liked his solitude, so the infrequent meetings suited him better. It was also novel having a steady lover although they'd finally managed to slow down in that area as well. As much enjoyment as the activity provided, they weren't getting enough rest.

That was the state of things when Hermione breezed into his office unannounced one afternoon.

"Blenkinship is an idiot," she proclaimed angrily as she opened a bag and pulled out containers of takeaway. "I got you the lamb Tikka Shashlik Massalla and the Vegetable Dansak with pilau rice ... I remember you eyeballing those the last time we ordered."

Severus quietly put away his work along with the bacon buttie he'd fixed earlier. "And just why is he an idiot?"

"He had the nerve to slip a potion into my cider when we went out for drinks last night. Like I don't wandlessly check everything I ingest out of habit," she said disgustedly as she put her own order of Tandoori Mixed Grill in front of her. "I got extra naan this time."

"Thank you. I agree with you that Blenkinship is an idiot. Is he still alive? Or do you need my help with hiding the body?" he asked calmly as he took his share of the bread to go with his meal.

"He's still alive, unfortunately, but I hexed him with haemorrhoids ... my own variation ... so he won't be comfortable for a while yet," she said with a look of satisfaction on her face.

Severus snorted and turned to enjoy his meal. He now understood exactly what Weasley had tasked him with. Blenkinship thought it was proper to slip unsuspecting women potions to get what he wanted. Severus disagreed. He would take care of it. He had the perfect potion in mind, and it would take another Master to even attempt to counter it. Otherwise it would wear off in a month.

"Oh, I brought this treatise by Kaftan for you to look over. I noticed you didn't have it, and I was certain you'd find it amusing."

"I'll look it over next week. I'll be at a point in brewing where quite a bit of hurry up and wait is involved," he replied. He actually had time now, but the rest of this week would be spent doing reconnaissance for a special delivery.

Severus was pleased to see Hermione less angry as she packed up and headed back to her own office after lunch. It had been odd to have her come to him just to blow off a bit of steam and not request anything of him other than a friendly ear. And she'd brought him lunch and a bit of light theory to shred to bits in his spare time. Minerva was a friend, but she never just wanted to bend his ear. She usually wanted advice, which he didn't mind giving, but it wasn't the same.

He finished clearing up and put away his notes. He had one of the Half-Blood Prince's specialties to brew.

Hermione came to him a few more times over the next few months to complain about the idiots she attempted to date, but she gave fewer and fewer details as time went on. Severus took this to mean that the word had got out that she was being looked after and was quietly pleased. What he hadn't noticed was the fact that she really wasn't informing him about any of her outings after a while. He was so caught up in his work that he hadn't honestly noted the difference. He did notice that she hadn't come to him at all for work or pleasure during the past week, so he was making an effort to finish up early to make certain that she wasn't ill.

"Mr Snape?" his receptionist called out from his office.

"What can I do for you, Robert?" he responded, as he made his way from the lab.

"There's a Mr Ronald Weasley here to see you if you have a moment."

Severus froze in the doorway. "Send him in immediately."

Severus quickly made his way across the room to stand in front of his desk as Ron entered the office. He didn't waste any time in greeting him.

"Weasley, is something wrong with Hermione?" he asked, hating the tightness in his voice. He really should have checked up on her, if only to say hello.

Ron casually crossed his arms and stared. "Why, hello to you too, Snape. I'm doing just fine, thanks."

"Weasley!"

"I'm not one of your scared little Firsties, and I can't be baited," Ron stated calmly. "So offer me a chair, and I'll tell you why it's not a good thing to upset Hermione."

Severus waved Ron to a seat and rounded his desk to take his own chair. Pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, he closed his eyes and took a calming breath. This was why he'd refrained from close friendships and relationships in general; he didn't know how to deal with situations like this. Leaning forward, he looked at Ron and sighed.

"What have I done to upset Hermione to the point that she's avoiding me? She's avoiding me and not incapacitated, correct?"

"She's avoiding you," Ron confirmed. "What surprises me is the fact that she hasn't already made your ears bleed. If I'd managed to bollocks-up the situation ... oh, I know why she hasn't! She can't prove it," he said with a satisfied grin.

"Weasley, get to the point," Severus snapped, unable to take any more.

"Fine. You remember what I said at the party?"

"You told me she was my responsibility," he replied.

"No, before that. I told you that Hermione was capable of taking care of herself, and you agreed," Ron stated grimly. "It wasn't code for 'Let her think she's handling things and then go behind her back', it was my way of saying, 'She can take care of herself, so let her, or you'll piss her off.'"

"How was I supposed to get all of that from those two statements!" he bellowed, slamming his hands down on the desk in frustration.

Ron sat back and shrugged. "I had no idea that you would read into it, although I should have, considering you were Head of Slytherin and all. I only meant that you needed to be there for her when the tossers got on her last nerve or made her cry and think she wasn't good enough."

"And she trusts you with tactics." Severus snorted as he came to grips with the fact that Hermione didn't want the kind of help he'd been providing.

"The others you went after wouldn't have even rated a raised eyebrow, let alone a personal response, but if it's any consolation, we don't blame you for whatever you did to Blenkinship. He's a nasty piece of work, and we don't know what Hermione was thinking to even agree to go with him for a pint."

"We?" Severus asked.

"Oh, Marissa, Harry and me. We may not always agree with how Hermione deals with the little bottom feeders, but she's wickedly inventive, so we leave her to her own devices. She needs to gain that confidence back," Ron said with a sad, faraway look in his eyes.

They sat in silence for a bit and Severus hated the fact that someone like Hermione actually needed to regain her confidence, especially because he knew that both he and Weasley had had a history of having chipped away at it from the very beginning of their association with her. They weren't the only ones ... the wizarding world in general had been unkind, but it still rankled.

"I was planning on seeing her this evening, just to check up on her," Severus said softly. "How would you suggest I handle things?"

"If it were me, I'd come clean and tell her everything. Let her know why you did it, and that it wasn't because you didn't think she could take care of herself. She'd appreciate that."

"Isn't that a bit simple?"

"Hermione's like that ... she actually has an appreciation for simple under the right circumstances. Besides, you can always make it up to her," Ron said with a salacious grin.

"Get out of my office. Now," Severus ordered, standing and pointing to emphasise the directive.

Ron stood as well and gave him a genuine smile as he headed to the door. "You're welcome, Snape. Glad to be of help." With a cocky wave, he sauntered out.

Falling back into his chair, Severus contemplated on how to approach the situation he'd unknowingly created with Hermione. He refused to go begging again as he had done with Lily, but he did want to make things right. He was also a bit hacked off that she hadn't trusted their friendship enough to say something to him. But then, their friendship was still rather new and somewhat unequal. He'd yet to invite her into his home, amongst other things. However, he had shared his atrium with her, and that was something he hadn't done with anyone else ... not even Draco. This was *complicated*. He wasn't sorry in the least for sticking up for her ... especially when it came to people like Blenkinship ... because he cared about her, and a friend deserved better than what that worm had tried to do to her. Nonetheless, his own actions had inadvertently hurt her as well. He was tying himself into knots. If he kept on, he'd never leave.

Sitting forward, he impatiently scrubbed at his face, then ran his fingers through his hair before finally deciding that Weasley was right. "Simple" was the best way to deal with this. Flicking his wand, he sent his Patronus to the young man and asked him for her whereabouts.

A feisty Jack Russell Terrier returned a moment later. "*She's at home, you git, now get moving!*"

oOOOoOo

Severus was full of apprehension as he stepped from the Apparation point and walked up the private drive of the house in Warlingham that Hermione had mentioned she'd purchased with part of her own war stipend when he'd asked. It was a large single detached house made of Cotswold stone, with an inordinate amount of windows to the rear, surrounded by a small stand of beech trees that grew near a stream. He concentrated on those details in an attempt to drown out the flashbacks of making his way up to the seventh floor and waiting outside the portrait that guarded Gryffindor. If Hermione didn't let him in, he would leave.

He slowly climbed the doorsteps and tapped his wand to the door knocker, which depicted playful otters in a stream, and waited. A few moments later, a flustered Hermione opened the door.

"Severus! I was just in the middle of fixing something to eat. Do you want to join me? I have enough for two," she babbled nervously as she stepped back to allow him in.

Following her inside and through the tan and cream coloured entryway, he removed his cloak and hung it on one of the hooks there before following her back to the kitchen and lounge area that took up a good portion of the ground floor. Most of the house was done up in pale creams, tans and gold with polished beech wood flooring, lots of greenery and windows that lent an open, airy feel to it. The kitchen and lounge were the exception.

The flooring was black oak, and the walls were alternating shades of Moroccan red, terracotta, dark brown and cream. The kitchen proper had black granite worktops with equally black cabinetry that housed stainless steel appliances. The lounge boasted two abstract tapestries displayed upon its walls, along with myriad photos, both magical and Muggle. There were various books piled on two low tables, and comfortable seating that appeared to be randomly situated. The entire length of the room comprised of floor-to-ceiling windows and doors, which gave it the feel of a solarium.

Severus made his way to his favourite chair that faced the terraced gardens to the rear of the property and sat before responding. "No, I'm not hungry, thank you. I just came to see how you were and to make an apology," he stated diffidently.

"And just what do you think you need to apologise for?" she said as she stopped in front of him and placed a hand on her hip.

"I seem to have overstepped myself, but I didn't know that I had until a certain friend of yours pointed the fact out to me. Why have you been avoiding me?" he asked, the weariness evident in his voice.

Hermione wrapped her arms about herself and turned away. "I didn't want to overreact."

He steepled his fingers, leaning over to rest his elbows on his knees, silently cursing the fact that he'd cut his hair so short. "I thought we were friends."

She whipped around suddenly and knelt in front of him. "We are. I just didn't want to fight about something that I might be wrong about. You don't deserve that."

"So you avoid me completely instead, hoping I wouldn't notice? As single-minded as I've been as of late, even I noticed that I hadn't seen nor heard from you for a week. I was already planning on checking on you today before your redheaded friend dropped by to let me know I'd cocked up," he snapped as he reached out and shot up, pulling her to her feet with him.

"It's just that you've spent most of your life being unjustly accused, or having people overreact, so excuse me if I wasn't in a hurry to join the queue!" she shouted, standing toe to toe with him, her head tilted back in defiance.

Severus' eyes narrowed, and he growled as he turned sharply and started to pace. "You can't spend all of our association tiptoeing around the landmines in my history," he hissed. "I have spent a good portion of the years since the war forcibly putting Lily, the Marauders, Dumbledore, and anyone else that took up too much of my psyche behind me in an almost futile attempt to. Learn. How. To. Live," he bit out angrily. "If you're going to wrap me in cotton wool and make yourself miserable in the process, I ..."

"Don't you even go there, Severus Snape! *I am* your friend!" she cut in angrily as she stormed up to him.

"If you are truly a friend, why don't you just go ahead and ask," he responded heatedly. "You would have already done so if I were one of those two other dunderheads you so love, but you don't trust me enough."

"Oh, I think I do," she said furiously as her chin jutted out and her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Tell me ... just what was your purpose in going after those men I told you about in confidence? I had already dealt out my own brand of justice when needed ... I'm not a helpless, broken damsel in distress. I came to you as a friend, just needing to vent a bit, and you took things too far."

"So Weasley informed me," he spat. "What was I thinking? I was thinking that you were my friend and that you didn't deserve the crap they were exposing you to. I know that you are capable, clever and fiendishly inventive when crossed. I wasn't trying to imply that you couldn't handle the situations on your own."

Severus turned away and looked out the window again. "I was just doing the one thing that had never been done for me: no one ever truly defended me from the bullies," he said softly. "Oh, they mouthed their platitudes and tsked appropriately, but they stood by and let me defend myself over and over again. They never did what was in their power to make the bullies stop, or at least think several times over before they sought me out again."

His shoulders slumped and he hung his head in defeat. "I just wanted to do that for you."

He felt arms come up around him and her head rest against his back. "We're both idiots," she stated tiredly.

"I can't argue with that," he murmured as he turned in her embrace and pulled her closer. "You have to admit that it was funny hearing Macmillan announce, 'I'm a blithering idiot', every time someone said his name within hearing distance for an entire hour. I think half the Ministry workers in the vicinity took advantage of it."

Hermione snickered. "That was one of your better pranks. Thank you for making certain I was nowhere near when he was originally hexed. I only knew to go see because Harry sent for me."

"It's all about plausible deniability. Neither of us was present when the hex deployed. I used the delay sequence we worked out," he replied smugly as he watched her eyes light up.

"Did you really have to make all of Theo's hair fall out? I know I thought he was a bit of an arse with his intimation that I should switch over to the hair-care line that he promoted if I wanted people to take me seriously as a real witch, but it was only a minor offence."

"It didn't just fall out ... it grew back in every morning in a different colour combination for a week. I thought the Weasley red with the purple checks was rather fetching," he stated casually with a smirk, smiling when she actually gave in and laughed.

Hermione tugged on his arm and turned them towards the sofa. "I need to sit," she gasped.

"Yes, you do," he said as he guided her down and sat afterwards.

When she regained her composure, she sighed. "I have to ask. Tell me exactly what you did to Blenkinship. He's been a total wreck as of late."

Severus closed his eyes briefly and hoped that this anecdote wouldn't ruin things. "I slipped him a behavioural modification potion of my own devising," he murmured. "It was designed to link with his derogatory sexual thought patterns. Every time he considered date-rape, he broke out in hives. The directive only lasted for thirty days, but he is a serious case. Because he continued with the undesirable behaviour, he's developed self-induced panic attacks. I suspect that he finally figured out that his thoughts were linked to the rather painful and embarrassing hives, and he can't tell the Healers his conclusion. I studied him before I decided to slip him the potion, and witnessed him drug three witches and five Muggles in one week's time. I even took a risk and gave the information to the MLE, but he has too many friends there."

"I know," she said softly. "I used myself as bait to attempt to build a case and it was buried within hours. I wish Kingsley were still Minister, but if wishes were horses, yeah? So I spoke with all of the women at the research lab at Uni and told Erik, as well. He managed to get Blenkinship assigned to a different project in an isolated location that has few women about. That was the best he could do on short notice."

He nodded and pulled her closer. "The only reason I didn't kill him was the fact that I knew it would be a deal-breaker for you. I wanted him dead, especially after what I witnessed."

"I wanted him dead, too, but we can't have it all," she replied, smirking. "Speaking of which, as humorous as the pranks have been, please ask me first, next time, or I'll just refrain from telling you about my adventures in dating."

"I believe I can agree to that, even if it does spoil my fun."

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Severus."

They sat tucked together in silence until something she had said earlier struck him.

"Did you just call our project leader by his given name?"

She blushed. "Oh, Erik ... yes, I did. We've been working together so much over the past couple of months, and he's not a bad sort," she said with a shrug. "I'd better warn you though, he's taking me to lunch soon ... it's not a date. It's just that he noticed my tendency to work until I drop and has threatened to drag me to lunch the next time we're working. He also noticed that you consistently called for a break and fed me when he spent those three days briefing us on the samples, so he says that if you aren't there to make me see reason, he would."

"And you're going to put up with that?" he asked carefully.

"Like I said, he's a good one. I'll let him get away with the mother hen act. Now, I do need food, even if you don't. Could I get you a drink?"

Severus considered for a moment ... he was emotionally exhausted. The outcome of this misunderstanding completely trumped the one in his past, but he was still gutted. "Truthfully, I'm more than a bit knackered. I think I better head home. I'm just happy to have resolved things between us."

Hermione looked at him carefully before shaking her head. "No, you don't get off that easily. You know where the bed is. Take a nap. You owe me make-up sex. This was our first real argument. Kissing and making up is a requirement, so go grab a kip and I'll give you a proper waking in a bit."

He was in no shape to try and dissuade her. He slowly stood and made his way down the hall to her room. He'd never managed a friendship that didn't implode at some point, so tonight was a true accomplishment. He'd never had make-up sex before either, he thought as he stripped off and made himself comfortable. He fell asleep, peacefully anticipating his wake-up call.

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Oddly enough, the upshot of the whole argument was the fact that they became even better friends. He found himself seeking Hermione out to share a thought or indulge in a bout of sex just as freely as she had always done. He stoically put up with being attacked by the kitten she'd recently acquired and hadn't once suggested using it for potions ingredients. He even dragged her out to a Muggle theatre to hear Tchaikovsky so he didn't have to go alone. While make-up sex had been a revelation in itself, the openness (to an extent) that now existed was almost more than Severus could handle emotionally at times. The current discussion in progress was a case in point.

"Of course I can attend the testing and take notes and observations for you. I'll even provide you with a Pensieve record, but it won't be as effective as your own observations. This is your work, Severus. You need to be there to see it implemented; only you can tell if it's progressing the way you designed it to," Hermione vehemently stated.

"No, I *don't* need to be there. You know what to look for, and that is more than enough for me," he replied stubbornly, swivelling his chair about to face the bay window behind him.

"This is the threshold testing. Even with both of us observing, we might not get everything you want. There are six subjects involved, and unlike you, I've never studied or mastered mind magic, so I don't have the ability to observe and mentally record things as finely as you can," she argued, her frustration finally winning out. "Obviously, there is something that I'm missing in all of this, so if you'd just explain," she implored with a sigh.

"No."

"Right then, I'm taking a walk." Throwing up her hands, she stormed out the doorway that led to the atrium.

He continued to stare out the window in silence. Six subjects was six too many when the possibility that all of them could transform still existed. Yes, they would all have ingested the modified Wolfsbane, so they wouldn't harm themselves or others, but he couldn't force himself to be present to observe. Most likely, his observations wouldn't be of use. He still had waking flashbacks of Lupin, Greyback and the other werewolves he'd witnessed change, and several of those incidents had placed him in life-threatening situations. Lupin's were the worst, because they were inextricably linked to the Shrieking Shack and *always* cascaded to flashbacks of Nagini's attack. His response to those flashbacks was humiliating and debilitating ... he'd worked too hard to find balance to risk succumbing to them again.

Hermione thought she was handicapped for not having studied mind magic, she didn't understand how fortunate she was to be capable of allowing time to blur the edges on her more traumatic experiences. He could compartmentalise and Occlude when necessary, but every fine detail and emotion was there for the asking, whether he wanted them or no. He re-lived memories as if they were occurring in the now ... particularly the bad ones.

He should have probably had more faith in his art and allowed himself to believe that only the two control subjects would actually transform, but he wasn't ready ... he'd never be ready. The Mind Healers he'd worked with had done what they could to help him control the more sensitive triggers, having never dealt with a case where a subject had Occluded for the better part of seven years, and for most of his experiences it was enough. However, there was only so much peace that could be made on this particular subject.

Pushing up from his chair, he slowly made his way to the atrium. She was sitting on the low wall beneath the stand with one bird on her shoulder and the other on her knee. The one on her shoulder attempted to preen her hair while the other butted her gently on the chest, trying to soothe her as she scratched his head. Both turned to glare at him as he crossed the space and sat down beside her.

"You've corrupted my birds," he grumbled.

"I can't help it if they like me better," she muttered petulantly, refusing to look at him.

They both continued to sit in silence and look at nothing.

"I can't go," he finally said, hoping that he wouldn't have to explain.

"You've already told me you won't go, so you didn't need to come ..."

"No," he snapped, cutting her off. "**I can't** go." He held himself stiffly and looked away to hide his own frustration.

Hermione studied him, "Oh. I see." She continued to look at him thoughtfully before replying. "You should have said that in the first place." After gently shooing the birds away, she turned and took one of his hands and tugged softly until he looked her way. "I'll find a way to get what you need."

Severus looked at her and was amazed to find no sign of pity, just the firm determination he was used to seeing when she had a particularly fiddly problem to deal with. Reaching out with his free hand, he softly pulled her face closer and kissed her on the tip of her nose, causing her to startle. "Thank you for understanding," he murmured as he pulled away and stood.

Looking up, Hermione scrunched her nose at him in consternation. "I think it's got to the point where I know you rather well."

"And you haven't run off screaming," he quipped, offering a hand up, which she readily took.

"No," she replied, as he helped her to her feet. "But I am going to run off for the moment. I've got to check on my cat and stop by Harry's."

"And just how goes it with Ariadne?"

"I keep telling you it's *Antigone*, and it's still not exactly *Pax Terra Marique*, but we're getting along now. It would have been more helpful if my parents had let me choose my own Kneazle instead of giving me one as a gift, but I suppose they're trying, so I shouldn't complain."

"It would probably be helpful if you actually spent more time with her. Kneazles may be independent by nature, but they don't like to be ignored," Severus countered.

"Well, I don't enjoy being ignored either," she admitted sadly, "but every time I look for her, she takes off and hides."

"Antigone hides because her name should be *Ariadne*, but you never listen to me," he said with mocking humour. "Now in all of this running about, I haven't heard mention of you actually stopping to eat. Do I need to feed you before I let you out of my sight?"

"No, I've got dinner with Erik later, so I'll be fine."

He looked at her sardonically and snorted. "I thought you said you two weren't dating."

"We aren't, more's the pity. Strictly a working dinner to deal with the logistics of the testing," she stated flatly. "Actually, you could come with ... I could still use your input."

"I have no desire to be a third wheel," he sneered as he walked past her towards his office.

"Of all the bloody . . . Severus Snape, this is not a date!" she wailed, stomping her foot for emphasis.

"You just keep telling yourself that," he called over his shoulder as he made his way into the connecting hallway and smirked when he heard her faint huff of *Men!*"

Yes, men. She was obviously deluding herself if she thought that Coulson was all business. With a sigh, he sat behind his desk. Now he'd have to keep an eye on him. He did have to give the other man credit. He was obviously observant enough to realise that someone looked out for her, and that unpleasant things happened to those who dated and abused her in some fashion. Of course Coulson wasn't calling these little *tête-à-tête's* dates; he was smarter than that. Pulling out his Dicto-Quill and activating it, he pushed those thoughts aside and concentrated on creating the outlines she would need for the testing observations.

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The next morning, he received an invitation to deliver a keynote address three weeks hence on Defence at a symposium in Switzerland. It conveniently took place on the night of the testing. They also wanted him to deliver a lecture later that week for the attendees that focused on teaching Defence as a multi-disciplinary unit in conjunction with Transfiguration, Charms and Potions during NEWT years, as well as in other places of higher learning. Hermione and Minerva were the only ones privy to the fact that that was a pet project of his, so he was certain that one of them was responsible for providing him with the opportunity for a plausible out for the test date. He knew that none of the team would begrudge it to him ... the symposium was highly prestigious, and his participation would only serve to boost the already stellar profile of their research group. While penning his acceptance he noticed that there was a dinner on the last night and smiled inwardly as he wrote down the number two for the attendance headcount. Sliding a clean sheet of stationery in front of him, he wrote a note to Hermione, telling her to clear her calendar for that evening ... she was officially on escort duty.

He spent the rest of the morning taking care of the details: having Robert make travel and hotel arrangements, sorting his wardrobe for the event and sending off the acceptance along with his other correspondence before pulling out the Defence manuscript that he'd worked on for several years. The rest of the day would be spent in putting together the bones of his speech and lecture; the next day would be spent finishing up the observation outline for Hermione, leaving the rest of the time for him to focus on creating a memorable presentation.

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Three weeks later, Severus sat in his hotel suite nursing a slight headache several hours after sunrise. His speech had been exceptionally well-received, and the presenters of the symposium were gratifyingly attentive throughout the evening. He really should have been asleep, but his mind was busily tormenting him with scenarios of the testing that he'd avoided. At least no one expected to see him about until early evening. It was too soon to check with Hermione to see how things had actually gone, but he was certain that nothing disastrous had occurred ... she would have contacted him.

Making a decision, he pulled out the room service menu and placed an order for porridge, eggs, tea and toast before searching out a mild Headache Relief potion from his travel bag. When that was taken care of, he made his way to the shower. About halfway through his meal, an otter Patronus sailed through the wall and playfully circled his head before delivering its message:

"I've got Harry's Cloak, so if you'll give me your room number, I can be there in a trice without all of the speculation that my going to the front counter for the same information will stir up. It's your call."

Even half asleep, he didn't even need to think twice before he sent his own Patronus on its way, and five minutes later an equally tired-looking, but elated Hermione was sitting at his table nursing a mug of tea.

"So, how did it go?" he asked calmly.

"We found the threshold ... subjects Four, Five and Six didn't transform," she responded wearily.

"But?"

"We had to administer the antidote in full to subject Three, and partial doses to Five and Six. Subject Six will be under observation for a few days. He had a strong reaction to the treatment ... his liver started to bleed." Reaching into her messenger bag, she pulled out a copy of the trial notes along with three phials.

"You can't possibly have removed that many memories ... you'd be comatose," he stated as he picked up each phial and scrutinised it.

"I didn't. One contains my memories, the others are Harry and Draco's."

His eyes snapped up to her face and he groaned. "You didn't actually tell them ..."

"No ... I didn't have to. I only asked Harry if he could come in his official capacity as one of the partners of the Trust and be a second set of eyes for my Pensieve records, and he said that it would look odd if Draco didn't come, as well."

"I'm surprised that Draco agreed ... his history with Greyback was not pleasant."

"He told me he was doing it for himself," she answered with a neutral smile.

"I hope you sent a therapy-grade dose of Dreamless Sleep home with him," Severus responded as he gently placed the phials in the pocket of his robes that had been designed to carry them.

"I insisted." Reaching into her bag, she removed an additional phial. "This one is from Erik. He doesn't know about the other two."

He took the last phial from her with mixed feelings. "And his reason for providing it?"

She picked up her mug and took another sip before answering. "His memories are almost solely concentrated on subjects Four, Five and Six. He's the one who took my preliminary calculations and devised an algorithm for administering partial dosages of the antidote."

"He administered the dosages himself," he stated.

"Yes. So he had the best viewing of what went on with them," she said with a faint shudder.

"So your memories are of?"

"Subjects Three, Four and Five with Harry's covering the complete trial overall, since he has the training from work. Draco focused on subjects One and Two ... they were the ones who received the version modified to mitigate pain and ease transformation."

He nodded to himself, grateful that Draco had only had to concentrate on the least emotionally charged subjects. Those two should have experienced a change that was as fluid and painless as the Animagus transformation and spent most of the time asleep. Adding the last phial to the collection, he pushed further thoughts aside. "Since there isn't anything pressing that I need to see, I'll deal with this when I get home." Looking casually at Hermione, he continued. "I have no obligations until this evening's meeting for presenters. What are your plans for the rest of the day?"

"I need to check on subject Six, but not until tonight, and then I need to finish packing. I'm supposed to arrive here officially tomorrow afternoon. I plan on attending your lecture the following day, and then we have the dinner that evening. Why do you ask?"

He stood and gently removed the mug she'd been holding, setting it on the table. Leaning down, he reached out, tipped her head just so and kissed her. It was long and slow, communicating everything that ultimately didn't need explanation. Eventually, he pulled back, holding out his hand. "Yes?" he enquired.

"Oh, definitely," she responded as she stood and allowed him to guide her towards the bedroom.

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The aftermath of the symposium was an exercise in controlled chaos. Severus was inundated with requests for consultations, workshops and practical demonstrations. He even received two enquiries from prominent publishing houses wanting to know if he was interested in marketing his manuscript as a series. It was the type of acclaim he'd sought by joining Riddle all those years ago, and the irony was sobering. With a bit of work and resourcefulness, he might even be able to leave a more positive legacy to Hogwarts than his infamy as Headmaster. But first, he needed to complete his portion of work on the project.

The last week had been trying as well as tiring. He'd viewed one set of memories a day, starting with Draco's, and the process had taken its toll. He'd been short with Robert, who was only trying to impose a bit of sanity on Severus' availability. He'd snapped at Hermione, warned her not to return until he'd finished the process and finally resorted to cutting off all outside contact. It was a good thing that he'd done so ... her memory of the trial was the most painful to deal with.

Subject Three was the one who both he and Hermione had worried about and the only one who had been given the standard Wolfsbane potion along with the lowest dose of the suppression formula. The calculations had shown that the chance of failure ranged in the eighty-ninth percentile and that actual transformation would be extremely painful upon failure. He'd provided a full dose of the antidote for the suppression formula, along with a Sleeping Draught for the female subject who had volunteered. What actually occurred was not predicted. The female werewolf had been stuck in flux ... it was horrifying to watch as an assistant Stunned the convulsing subject so that Hermione could administer the antidote. It had taken another five minutes for the woman to actually complete transformation and drink the Sleeping Draught.

Ironically, both Potter and Coulson's memories were the easiest to deal with. Potter, because he had learned to make detailed observations that were almost completely free of emotional involvement, provided a decent overview. Coulson's observations were all of subjects who did not transform, and even though he'd been forced to administer partial doses of the antidote to two of the subjects to bring their chemistries within threshold parameters, he'd been concise and extremely clearheaded. The only time that Coulson's memory had been imbued with an overt emotion had been at the very end as he looked over at Hermione as she finished dealing with subject Three. Severus could discern the other man's admiration as a palpable force.

It took him two days to shut down the flashbacks and mentally file away the emotional debris. The memory of viewing Hermione's memory he removed completely in order to lessen the guilt he felt for not having been there to support her. He had spoiled her after the fact when she'd shown up at the hotel by being exceedingly attentive to her physical and emotional needs. Nevertheless, she was mostly involved in the trial itself because he hadn't been able to face it. Mentally pushing away his regret, he sent a message to her, asking her to arrange a team meeting. It was time for him to leave his personal insanity behind and join the living.

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Severus was in the process of taking care of the aquatic ingredients housed in the atrium when Hermione arrived the next afternoon. He looked up, took off his work gloves and sat them on the ledge of the pond before speaking.

"Thank you for agreeing to come," he stated formally. "It appears that I owe you another apology."

She shook her head and laughed bitterly in response. "Oh, no ... I've been reliably informed that I'm the one who overstepped this time."

Taking in her dejected appearance, he motioned for her to follow him onto the enclosed balcony at the far end of the atrium to the table where he'd laid out things for coffee and motioned for her to take a seat. She took her time, carefully preparing the hot beverage to her liking, while not looking at him.

"Hermione ..."

"It really was my fault," she cut in, glancing up at him before returning her attention to her mug. "I went to Harry, carping about how you shut me out, that you wouldn't even consider allowing me to support you, and do you know what he told me?"

Severus raised an enquiring eyebrow as he rotated his mug back and forth between his dextrous fingers.

"He said that sometimes the best support a friend can give is to know when to gracefully give the other person the space they've asked for. And then he proceeded to lecture me on the "obscure but highly useful branch of magic, known as Occlumency". He told me about how certain thoughts and memories are linked to emotions and experiences ... that a Legilimens could drag those memories up and cause a person to relive them. He told me that a few of his memories are so volatile that he keeps them Occluded so as not to experience waking flashbacks because it's like reliving them all over again. The memory of his mother being killed can be triggered just by him seeing a Dementor in the distance," she said sadly, putting her mug down and twisting her fingers together painfully.

Severus reached out his own hands and grasped hers to stop her. "It isn't your fault that my method of dealing with my flashbacks is to shut everyone out."

"I understand that, but it is my fault when I refuse to leave well enough alone," she said with a weak smile. "I once accused Harry of having a "saving people thing", and truthfully, I'm just as guilty at times."

"Well, in my book, not too many others have ever even bothered to try to save me, so you are forgiven."

"Thanks for that," she said with a sigh.

She still wouldn't look at him, so he tried another tack. "Tell me, if it's really, truly sorted, why are you behaving as if it isn't?"

She looked at him guiltily. "Just because I know you're not angry with me doesn't mean that I wasn't upset by being shut out. It's not your problem. I just need some more time to get over myself. And because you're a decent friend, you'll give it to me," she added cautiously.

"Granted," he replied solemnly.

"Marvellous! So shall we move on to setting up that meeting?" she asked with a false brightness that he pretended to accept because she'd requested it of him.

Sometimes, friendship was a bitch.

A/N: First off: Thank you, once again, for the additional SPaG beta work, Karelia.

On Occlumency and Pensieves - this is my extrapolation of what might occur from the overuse of both. I fully realise that canon says there is no emotional transfer when memories are viewed via a Pensieve, but I think there is evidence to support the possibility - "The Prince's Tale" and Harry's reaction to Snape's raw memories.

I also feel that Severus' overuse of both Occlumency and Pensieves would have caused an unusual type of sensitivity for him when viewing other's memories. Just my own pet theory.

Part IV

Chapter 5 of 5

In which there is a conclusion

The conference room that Coulson directed them to was located down the hall from his personal lab, and Severus was suitably impressed. It was intimate, comfortable and functional with wood panelling, comfortable seating and plenty of space to display exhibits. There were five other attendees, not counting himself or Hermione. Taking a seat, he was relieved when Hermione sat down next to him. She'd said that they were good, but he could tell that she was still a bit unhappy about his having shut her out when she'd only wanted to support him.

As the meeting began, he found himself half paying attention while introductions were made and settled in to listen to the status reports of the other researchers. He gave his own when it was his turn and answered questions when needed. The group was disciplined and didn't waste time or go off topic - he could definitely work with these people on a regular basis. Hermione presented the new timetable based upon the input from the team, and then Coulson stood to wrap things up.

"Well, if we keep to Granger's timetable and don't suffer any unforeseen problems, it looks like we might have a Christmas gift for the werewolf population at large this year." Turning to Severus, he continued. "Snape may not have been available to attend the actual trials, but his extensive, detailed observational notes from the Pensieve records have narrowed the focus of our research significantly." There were nods of agreement, as well as words of appreciation murmured by the other attendees. After a moment, Coulson raised a hand for silence.

"I'd like to make a request of all of you," he stated as he paced the length of the room. "I know that most of you prefer to work alone. The fact that the security of this project basically required that is what allowed me to convince most of you to come on board. However, now we are down to the last bit of it, so I believe it would be beneficial to all of us if we were more readily available to each other." He looked about to see if there was any dissent before continuing. "The facilities here are extensive enough to allow each of you your own office and lab. I'm hoping that you all will take advantage of that and temporarily relocate your work here for our last push."

Severus could see the advantages and didn't have a problem with the idea. One of the other researchers balked until he was assured that his apprentice would be allowed to work with him.

Everyone else gave their approval as well. Coulson smiled.

"So, now that the decision is unanimous, we'll end here. I will be in touch with all of you in two days' time with the particulars. I wish you a good afternoon," Coulson said as he walked back to his chair and gathered up his belongings.

Severus waited until most of the others had left before approaching him. Reaching into his robes, he brought out the memory phial. "Coulson, I'd like to thank you for the loan of your memory from the trials. I was only expecting the set that Hermione provided."

"She was primarily focused on subject Three during the most critical moments, and you really needed to see what was going on with Five and Six. I'm not going to hold the project back with the type of professional pettiness you may have been subjected to in the past." Accepting the phial, he opened it and used his wand to place the memory back where it belonged before putting the empty container in his pocket. "Thank you."

Severus gave him a nod and turned to make his way back to Hermione.

"Snape!" Coulson said, stopping him before stepping closer and lowering his voice. "This is a bit awkward, but I need to ask." He glanced towards Hermione and back again. "She's told me that the two of you have an open relationship of sorts."

Severus raised an eyebrow and folded his arms. "So that's what she's calling it in polite society."

"No, that's what I'm calling it. She was a bit more direct," he replied, his expression unreadable. "So it won't be an issue with you if I ask her out?" he challenged.

"As you've probably discovered, Hermione's very much her own woman," Severus stated, giving the other man a sardonic look. "I'm not her keeper."

Coulson looked him directly in the eye and leaned in a bit more to murmur, "Blenkinship would most likely disagree with that statement."

Severus favoured him with a blank stare in response.

Coulson held his gaze for a moment more before turning slightly and calling out, "Hermione ... lunch on me?"

She looked fleetingly from Severus to Coulson as she continued to pack up her notes, saying, "I don't see why not. I have a couple of questions about the revised timetable. We can work that bit out now, and then I won't have to bother you with it later."

He shook his head and walked over to where she stood. "I don't think so. I'd just like to make this clear so that there are no misunderstandings." He glanced at Severus before returning his attention to her. "This is not a working lunch. I'm asking you out on a date. You still interested?"

Severus smirked when she looked to him before answering, "Yes. I think I'd like that."

"Wonderful. I'll just meet you outside then," Coulson replied as he walked back and grabbed his briefcase. With another nod to Severus, he left the room.

Hermione stood stock still, staring after his retreating form. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Of course you weren't," Severus replied sarcastically. "I believe I told you otherwise not too long ago. You'd best get moving. I doubt he has any more patience than I."

"All right," she replied softly as she gathered her messenger bag to herself and walked slowly towards the door. "Severus?"

"Later," he snapped. She nodded and walked out, leaving him alone with his thoughts. He had to give the man points for knowing how to handle her. He pulled out a chair and sat, taking a deep breath to calm his sudden restlessness. It annoyed him to feel this way. She had been dating others from the very beginning, and he hadn't been troubled in the least. Not once. So why was this any different?

Pushing back abruptly, he stood and grabbed his file folder, casting a Shrinking Charm on it before placing it in his pocket. Who was he trying to fool? He knew exactly why he was bothered. Coulson was the first man to ask her out who he felt was worth his salt. With another irritated huff, he strode from the room, his robes snapping behind him.

oOOOOo

Severus was not waiting for Later, he told himself as he worked his way through his lab, gathering the things he would need in order to transfer his portion of the project to the new facilities. That it was only seven in the evening, compounded by the fact that the things he was currently packing away might be needed before the actual move, put paid to that concept. Reminding himself as to why it was neither safe nor healthy to lie to himself, he acknowledged the fact that he was waiting.

Right about the time he was considering putting things back, he felt his wards twinge, and Hermione came breezing in with a look of concern on her face.

"Severus, I know that you said later, but I didn't want to leave things as they were."

He watched her move towards him out the corner of his eye as he continued to sort through his knife kit, removing the duplicates and setting aside the few that needed sharpening. He was feeling a bit defensive but was determined to ignore his normal gut response, so he actively forced the tension from his limbs before speaking.

"I only said so because I didn't want you to stand around attempting to justify a situation that we'd already formed an agreement upon at the start of things," he stated

mildly. Looking up from his busywork, he registered the shocked look on her face.

"I realise that, it was just awkward. I don't like to seem as if I'm flaunting it." She looked over the knives, walked over to her work station, put her puncture proof gloves on and returned. "Where is your whetstone?"

He pointed out a narrow drawer, and she retrieved it. He listened to the soft susurrations of metal upon stone as she worked on the dull knives. He had several things that he wanted to say, but most of them were caustic. He finally settled on the least offensive. "You didn't create the awkward situation. Coulson chose to do so."

Hermione turned as if to comment, but stopped when he glared at her. "Please do not attempt to defend his actions ... the man was serving notice. I once asked you what you knew of him, and we never finished that conversation." He calmly went back to sorting his tools and waited to see if she would respond.

She completed her work on the knife she was holding before answering. "I know that he is Muggle-born, that his family fled to the States during the first War," she answered pensively. "He studied at Salem and then the Hellenic Healers Academy in Greece before returning here in nineteen-ninety-eight to take up residency at the newly formed Muggle Imperial College School of Medicine, which also houses a magical branch. His father is British and specialises in oncology. His mother is Greek and practices holistic medicine. That's all of the factual background I have."

As she reached for another knife, he placed a hand on her arm, stopping her. "I want you to pay attention to what I've learned about him." When he saw her frown, he shook his head before continuing. "It's nothing bad. You've said before that he's a good one, and he is; however, his background informs the way he chooses to do things."

"That doesn't actually reassure me, Severus."

With a frustrated sigh, he physically turned her towards the door. "The atrium balcony, if you please. I can't think about this in here." He gently pushed her forward.

"Fine, I'm moving!" she grouched, and they soon were sitting together on the window seat, looking out at the beginnings of sunset over the London skyline.

"This is lovely," Hermione noted. "Why haven't we sat here before?"

Severus shrugged and looked at his hands before looking her in the eyes and responding. "To be honest, I hadn't wanted to share it before."

"Well, at least you've brought me onto the balcony before, so you aren't completely selfish," she said with a smile.

Not completely selfish ... that did seem to sum him up rather well. Before he could get side-tracked again, he spoke. "Thank you, I think, but I need to finish my story about Coulson."

"All right, I'm listening."

Taking a breath, he launched into his tale. "Erik Coulson is Muggle-born; however, his mother grew up in a region of Greece where the tradition of the pharmakeia, the sorceress or witch, is alive and well. His parents were very supportive when they suspected he was magical. They didn't wait until he received his Hogwarts letter. His mother took him to the Hellenic Magical Academy when they visited with family in Athens and had it confirmed. Because he was British, the Academy contacted Dumbledore." Severus paused to marshal his thoughts before continuing.

"Dumbledore took them under his wing, and when the War heated up, he helped them relocate to the States. Coulson's parents didn't just flee ... they eventually helped twenty other children who were flagged "at risk" by Dumbledore to relocate and formed an enclave in Salem. The children were taught self-defence, both Muggle and magical, along with what to do if taken as a hostage. They also received training in statesmanship; it was pretty much the type of training you'd give to Muggle diplomats' children and other high-profile subjects. The children received regular schooling as well but were never really allowed to have a normal life, even after Riddle was supposedly defeated the first time around. Don't misunderstand me ... these children were well-adjusted and otherwise carefree."

"Is that why Dumbledore was so adamant that Harry was kept innocent? He'd watched as these others had their childhoods stripped from them? Or was it that he didn't want to deal with a child as sophisticated as these sound?" Hermione asked wryly.

"Both, quite likely." He rubbed his face tiredly. "Anyway, before Dumbledore died, he reactivated Coulson's group. They worked to hide or relocate many of the Muggle-born and half-blood children, as well as at-risk adults during the second War, especially when the Muggle-born Registration Commission was in power. Erik Coulson was actively involved. I've mentioned all of this to illustrate my belief that what he did today wasn't done in innocence."

He rested his back against the window and waited for her response. She seemed to go away for a bit, and he began to wonder if he should have just kept his trap shut. Finally, she turned and shook her head.

"Just what was your purpose in telling me this, Severus? I believe we agreed that you would keep out of my business unless I asked." Hermione said mildly.

"Levelling the playing field for a friend is not interfering," he stated defensively.

"I'm not stupid, and I'm perfectly capable of dealing with Erik without you trying to influence my opinion of him," she pointed out.

"Influence your opinion?" Severus said incredulously. "I tell you that the man is basically a bloody unsung ... you're right," he bit off. "Sorry I said anything. Just forget about it. This isn't worth another argument," he stated bitterly, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the cool of the window.

"I'm not trying to be difficult, Severus," Hermione replied tiredly. "And I do truly appreciate your concern. I have to agree with you on one issue. If he's had diplomatic training, Erik knows better. He really could have waited until you weren't around before asking me ... we see each other often enough."

Severus looked out the window and frowned. "I thought we were done with talking about Coulson."

"Well, it's not as if I can just conveniently forget what you've told me..." Hermione stopped.

"Don't give me ideas," Severus grumbled.

"Don't you dare!"

Hermione's tone of voice made him turn to her, and he couldn't help but smirk when he noticed her sour expression.

"I already have to deal with Erik. I don't need to wonder if I have to start watching my back with you."

"How insulting," he drawled playfully. "I would never, ever warn you," he stated as his smirk grew wider.

"That's it. I'm done here. I'm off!" Hermione announced, standing abruptly. Stepping closer to Severus, she reached out, lightly brushed his fringe and shook her head. "I just need you to be my friend. Please understand this. I'll deal with Erik."

"Deal with? Are you saying that Mr Coulson is up for a telling off?"

"You don't have to sound so cheery about it, and yes, he's earned it. Especially because we've become friends of a sort ... he's been holding out on me."

"I hold out on you," he reminded her.

"Well, yes, but I'm well aware of that," she replied dismissively. "I actually know that there are things that you will never share with me, along with things that you will eventually share. I know it sounds mental, but it makes a difference."

"If you say so."

"I do say so, Mr Snape," she quipped. "Erik knows how I feel about friendship, so the things he's chosen to omit make me wonder. If he wants to really be a friend, it's unacceptable."

He couldn't help but snort in response. "How many times do I have to point out that the man is not just interested in being friends?" Sneering at the indignant look she delivered, he murmured, "I am saying this as a friend. Your wilful blindness to this situation is going to end up causing you grief. This man is looking for a relationship of some sort, and as much as I hate to admit it, he's the first one I've seen you with that's actually worth taking seriously. If that is not what you want, you need to tell him so."

She wrapped her arms about her and turned to the window, but he still saw the blush that touched the cheekbone that faced him. "He is not the first man I've associated with as of late that is worth taking seriously. For your information, you hold that position."

Well, that left him feeling completely wrong-footed. But still. "Be as it may, you've said that you aren't interested in a more traditional relationship, so it still stands to reason that he be informed of your feelings on the subject."

She finally turned back, and he could see the confusion and vulnerability that fought behind her eyes. Heart on her sleeve. Still.

When she finally spoke, it was in a thoughtful, measured way. "I'll take it under advisement." She stood and rapidly headed across the room, but before she'd travelled very far she stopped and turned. "For the record, Severus, at this point in time, I'm not quite certain of what the hell it is that I want."

He watched silently as she continued on her way and he let her go. He didn't know if he wanted to respond to that statement, but he knew that he'd have to deal with it eventually. With a shake of his head, he made his way back to the lab to finish what he had started.

oOOOOo

Considering the way they'd left things, Severus was surprised to find that life had gone immediately back to the way it had been before "the Conversation," as he'd chosen to label it in his mind.

Severus had made the move to his temporary office and lab, which he found to be nicely appointed and well-situated, located in the same corridor as Hermione's. Both he and Hermione still found each other sexually satisfying and made time to indulge in said satisfaction. Robert was admirably holding the fort at his home office. The project was moving along swimmingly and his new colleagues both liked and respected him. Coulson hadn't made any other overt power-plays directed at him. Hermione dated Coulson occasionally, but also persisted on dating her usual brand of idiots as well, which amused Severus to no end.

So why was he lying in bed at three in the morning, staring at the ceiling when it was Hermione that had blatantly chosen not to deal with telling him what she really wanted from him? His thoughts on the matter were worth fuck all until she did choose to deal with hers. And there was the lie, because like as not, he personally needed to decide how he felt and what he wanted for himself. Throwing the covers off, he refused to lie there as usual and let thoughts run about his head until he'd either processed them or buried them deep enough to no longer matter.

Grabbing the dressing gown that lay at the end of his bed, he headed down to his office and started to pace. Since stalking the halls of Hogwarts had also been a ritualistic response to mental turmoil, he broke off and headed to the atrium where he was promptly greeted by Muninn, who settled onto his shoulder and started preening his hair.

"You're confusing me with Hermione, you barmy bird," he grouched, but let him continue as he purposely made his way to the stand and forcibly sat on the wall to think.

How did he feel about actually getting the girl, as it were? Because she had inadvertently admitted that if she were in the market for a traditional relationship, she considered him in the top of the running. On the whole, it was unexpected and flattering. Hermione was mostly sensible, highly intelligent and far from being high maintenance. He cared about her. She didn't purposely play the petty head games that most of the women he'd known indulged in. She truly cared about him and enjoyed working with him. She was a delightful and satisfying partner in bed.

She didn't push for the most part, and she didn't try to change him. She got his humour, put up with his sulks and gave as good as she'd got when he was out of bounds. She was causing him to grow both socially and emotionally. She was a wonderful friend, regardless of the relationship issue. These were some of the more important positives.

On the other hand, he'd managed to hurt her deeply without even trying, and he knew that it would happen regularly. He was both emotionally and mentally damaged, regardless of how well he'd overcome most of what went with that since the war. She tended to be too forgiving, and that frightened him. She wasn't high maintenance enough ... she shouldn't settle, she was worth spoiling from time to time ... but she didn't push him for it. She called him out on certain things, but generally allowed him to indulge his baser instincts ... did he really need to be with someone who encouraged his moral flexibility? She inadvertently pushed his emotions past what he was capable of processing in a safe manner. And he still hadn't invited her up to his flat. Something made him keep that one space from everyone, Hermione included, and he wondered what that said about him.

He was pulled from his spiralling thoughts when Muninn pulled roughly on a bit of hair. "That was uncalled for," he snapped and held out his arm to allow the bird to crab walk to his wrist. "Back to the stand for you, it is." Holding up his arm, he allowed the raven to hop to the nearest branch and sighed.

There was more on the plus side of the ledger, even with only listing the more significant things. That was the important bit and what he needed to know at the moment. He wasn't prepared to do anything more than continue being a good friend in return. Speaking of which, she had a birthday coming in a few weeks, and unlike last year, he would actually give her a gift. But what to give? As he headed back up to his bed, he smiled. He knew exactly what he would be giving her.

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On the nineteenth of September, Severus joined their colleagues in well-wishing Hermione a happy thirtieth natal day and put up with attending the lunch that was hosted in her honour. Another to-do was to take place at the Potters' home that evening, and she would be spending the next day at her parents for an additional celebration. As soon as it was feasible to do so, Severus slipped out of the luncheon and returned to his flat to retrieve her gift. With great satisfaction, he cast a Shrinking Charm on it and Apparated to her home to await her arrival.

"Severus?" Hermione called.

"Back here," he shouted from her lounge, as he finished the final touches on his gift.

"I'll have you know that leaving me to fend for myself is not on, especially on my birthday when I ..."

The bare spaces along two of the walls now had polished Vinewood artistically climbing them, jutting out in places that would serve as a temporary perch while meeting at the top of the intersection of the walls to form a generous bed for her Kneazle. Antigone, much like her namesake, was a moody, contrary, obstinate little thing that still tended to hide from Hermione when she wanted to spend time with her. The little princess was already making herself comfortable in the bed, so there was a good chance that she would now actually stay in the same room as her owner for more than five minutes at a time.

"Severus, this is amazing. Forget everything I just said," she said. Reaching out and following the vines with her fingertips, she laughed. "I wonder what Minerva will have to say when she next visits?"

"I think that I will keep my immediate responses to myself," he replied, satisfied that she was pleased with his gift. "You should know that the wood has been treated, so

your little princess can use it as a scratching post without damaging the finish. Happy Birthday, Hermione."

He started a bit when she turned and hugged him fiercely. As he hugged her back, he soon felt a wet spot on the front of his shirt. "Are you going all soppy on me because I gave you a gift?"

"I'm going all soppy because this is one of the most thoughtful gifts I've ever been given, and it is supremely unique."

As he continued to hold her in his arms and stroke his free hand along her unbound hair, he felt a warm welling of emotion flood his entire being. Severus tended to make the few gifts he gave due to his background.

He'd never had much in the way of pocket money while growing up. When he became Head of Slytherin, he often used his moderate bonus salary to sponsor some of the members of his House who came from backgrounds such as his, which still left him with little to spend on trinkets for others. Even now with his more than comfortable living situation, he continued to give those he cared about gifts of his own manufacture. But never before had such heartfelt appreciation been expressed.

It was a slight let-down when they finally separated, but they had places to be and they would make time for each other when their social obligations were done. With an internal sigh, he followed her out for his next stint of escort duties.

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A basic trial with adult participants of various ages was run for the full moon in September, monitored by handpicked medical staff to handle observations, and the success rate rose to ninety-eight per cent. Two participants had extreme allergic reactions, and although they didn't transform, Severus would not count them as a success. The suppression potion needed to be taken monthly, the same as Wolfsbane potion, and when he finally discovered the component that caused the reaction, he found that it was one that could not be substituted. Those with moonstone sensitivity would have to continue taking the recently modified Wolfsbane instead.

After October's full moon trial, which included children, Severus became so involved with fine-tuning the potion that he found he didn't miss working with Hermione, which was disturbing because he truly enjoyed their collaborations. It helped that they still met for morning coffee at least twice a week.

Hermione eventually mentioned that she had left off dating idiots and begun seeing Coulson exclusively. That didn't bother him, nor did hearing about Hermione and Coulson's trips to the cinema, the Tate, and Kew Gardens. What did bother him was the fact that Hermione didn't appear to realise that she was permitting Coulson to court her, which was the only way that Severus could explain Coulson's occasionally including his friends and, more notably, his parents, in their outings.

Because Severus was so enthralled by his work on the project, however, he didn't confront Hermione about her blind spot where Coulson was concerned.

It was their increasingly more frequent sexual encounters, most of which she initiated, that became the sticking point. Severus wasn't an exhibitionist and rarely engaged in public displays. Hermione knew this. Yet and still, while they were out attending a book signing for a Muggle author they both enjoyed, she'd pulled him into an alcove, Disillusioned the both of them, and proceeded to thoroughly wind him up. He'd finally snaked his hand down her blouse, activated her Portkey, only to almost trip on her damnable cat when they'd arrived at her home. The shagging that followed was invigorating, but Severus had warned her not to do it again.

She'd kept to that, but there were other things that were starting to disturb him. The actual tenor of how they engaged in sex gradually changed. Hermione had always been caring, but now there was a different type of tenderness that went along with it. Tenderness had always been a part of what they gave one another, but it had always been much more aggressive in nature. This was completely different. It was playful in a way that didn't fit with what they currently were to each other.

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It was early Saturday afternoon and Severus and Hermione had just left her bath, which was unusual in itself, because candlelit, joint bathing was not a normal activity for them. Now, Severus found himself face down on her bed enjoying the massage she'd insisted upon giving him. As she ran her fingers gently over his skin, he shivered.

"You're not getting cold?" Hermione whispered, leaning over his back to nibble sharply at the skin at the base of his neck where it met his shoulder.

"Not at all," he responded, hissing as she soothed the spot with her tongue.

Severus allowed her to continue her explorations until she licked him along his side, causing him to squirm.

"My, how did I ever miss that? Someone has a ticklish spot," Hermione sang playfully, proceeding to dive in and exploit it.

Severus flipped over and pinned her to the bed by her shoulders. "That wasn't very smart of you."

"That, my dear, is a matter of opinion," Hermione growled as she reached up, twining her fingers roughly in his hair before licking him on the nose as she began to tussle with him.

They rolled and bit and licked and poked until Severus found an especially vulnerable place ... the arch of Hermione's left foot.

With a vicious grin, he cast a wandless Sticking Charm on her, pinning everything but her left leg to the bed before tormenting her with his lips and tongue until she screamed.

"Please! I'm sorry. Severus, you win. Please stop!" she howled with tears of laughter running from her eyes.

He lowered her leg to the bed and sat back on his heels. "I have a clear advantage, why should I?"

"Because I can't breathe?"

"If you can still talk, you can breathe. Not good enough," he told her before casting a Sticking Charm on her other leg to keep it in place.

"What are you doing?" she wailed.

"This," he hissed as he leaned down and licked a slow path up her inner thigh before diving in and sucking on her clit, releasing the Charm just before she came apart.

When they'd both managed to regain their breath, Hermione sat up. She gently pushed him over while situating herself, covering him with gentle yet passionate kisses. This wasn't the way she normally did things...everything felt off. It only took one additional soft, no...loving...kiss, for Severus to twig to exactly what was occurring and realised that he needed to get up before he did something he'd regret. He forced all of the building rage he was feeling down and gently pushed her away.

"Hermione, stop."

"Hmm? Why?" she asked muzzily.

He turned away and stood to walk to the chair where he'd left his clothes. "Get up and get dressed. We need to talk. Now."

She sat up with a look of confusion on her face. "Now? What's wrong, Severus?"

"I'll speak with you when you are dressed and not before," he said firmly. "I'll wait for you in your lounge."

With his clothing in hand, he fled the room, quickly dressing before heading back to sit on the sofa. He spent the time awaiting her, Occluding...locking down all of the

negative emotion and thoughts...because he was determined to deal with this without resorting to his usual response to betrayal.

He spoke softly when she finally joined him on the sofa, watching Antigone leap from place to place along the network of vines before turning to her.

"Just exactly what are you playing at with Coulson?"

Hermione frowned at him. "I don't understand what you mean."

"I never thought I'd see you resort to this type of behaviour," he said softly, holding her gaze firmly. "You've been using me and I want to know why." When she made to look away, he reached out with both hands and gently grasped her face. "Explain to me what's going on." Her lips began to tremble, so he released her.

"I need to know where we stand," he demanded. "Now start talking."

She shrugged helplessly in response, causing Severus' patience to snap.

"You, my dear, are dangerously close to ruining our friendship."

"You can either talk, or I can walk out that door, reset the wards on my property and only deal with you professionally until this project is complete. You have your deal-breakers and apparently, I've just recently discovered one of mine. Decide."

"I'm falling in love with him," she whispered mournfully.

Severus flung himself back gracelessly, putting a bit of space between them and laughed bitterly. "All of this drama and that's all you have to say?"

She looked at him and shook her head. "I don't want to be in love with him, I'm already in love with you!"

He closed his eyes to shut out the pain of that declaration and opened them to watch as tears ran down her face. Then he made a declaration of his own:

"No, you aren't."

"How dare you say that I don't love you?" Hermione shouted, leaping to her feet to pace. "I loved you first, and if you'd ever given me the least hint ... I kept hoping that you would want more from me, that you would actually say that you wanted a go at a normal relationship with me!"

"You were the one that created the rules of engagement and I am a man of my word," he stated coolly. "I asked you not so long ago what you wanted, if you'll recall. You never got back to me."

"I didn't know what I wanted!" she screamed and started towards him in anger.

He stood to meet her. "And you obviously still don't," he said in clipped tones as he took a step forward and forced her to back up. "I've had enough time to observe, so I'm going to help you out. What you want is what you've been getting from Coulson. He respects you, admires you for your intelligence, your beauty, your joy of life itself. He adores making you happy and he's interested in the things that interest you. He wants a future with you and is willing to stand up to someone like me to have it."

"What if I want a future with you? Had you ever considered that?" she asked desperately as she took another backward step.

"If you had honestly wanted that, you'd have said so. Pull the other one, or better yet ... don't. Since you can't seem to figure it out, I'm going to tell you what I see happening: You've been letting Coulson create an itch, and then you've been coming to me to scratch it. Instead of being with him, you've persisted with me because I'm your designated fuck-buddy. I refuse to be used like that, even unintentionally ... especially by a friend," he sneered, watching her face as it lost all colour.

"Erik Coulson is in love with you. He's young, emotionally healthy and wants the world for you. You've done everything with him ... gone on silly outings, met his family and friends. You spend more time with him than with any other person of importance to you. I'm nothing more than a safety fuck at this point."

"It's not like that," she whispered. "I still need you."

"No. You. Don't." Looming over her, he quietly said his final piece in all of this. "You have done everything with that man except fuck him. Do us both a favour ... take care of that little chore. Take care of it tonight if you can, and then I dare you to look me in the eye tomorrow and tell me the same lie."

Turning swiftly, Severus walked out the door.

oOOOoOo

Somehow, he made it home and went straight to the atrium where he proceeded to sit woodenly on the wall. Both ravens immediately came to him, Muninn once again perched on his shoulder while Huginn took up position on his knee. Severus suffered a brief flashback of Hermione sitting in the same position and brutally Occluded, shoving the memory into his mental dustbin in response. He would have a horrible headache later on, but for now, his sanity was more important.

"I let Hermione go today."

He spoke in a gentle, gruff voice that he didn't quite recognise as his own, but continued on.

"I'm not quite certain she'll ever speak with me again, I wasn't exactly gentle."

Huginn moved closer and butted him gently in the chest.

"I most likely would have done better if I'd confronted her before it came to this, but I was selfish...I just wanted to hold onto the fantasy just a bit longer. I accused Hermione of wilful blindness, but truthfully, I was no better. I eventually did what was best for the both of us, I think, but it doesn't feel that way."

Severus closed his eyes on the pain that was starting to encompass him and shook his head, refuting it. He reached out a hand and slowly stroked Huginn's crown, and sighed when Muninn softly tugged at a bit of his hair. Rolling his eyes, he spoke. "You're upset with me because you think I gave up too easily?"

Muninn hopped down to the wall beside him and looked up, causing Severus to snort.

"I didn't give up. I love her, yes. But I'm not in love with her, and I'm not prepared to be in love with her. She was using me as a form of security in the end because she was afraid. I know you both like her, but I wouldn't have been a real friend to her if I'd allowed the situation to continue."

He watched as both birds cocked their heads as if they were truly listening. Since it appeared he had an attentive audience, Severus said aloud what he'd been thinking for a while, stating it as an affirmation of sorts, his tone of voice reverent.

"Hermione has helped me actually integrate into the future. I spent all the years after the war trying to do it, but it took her patience and knowledge to help me find the right pathways. For the first time, I feel as if I have a future that I'm actually interested in pursuing. I couldn't have done that without learning the true meaning of friendship."

Huginn bobbed his head as if in agreement, but Muninn appeared to be giving him a questioning look.

Severus smiled bitterly. "What? I can't go back. There's nothing to do now but wait and see if I still have a friend at the end of all of this."

This time, both of the birds butted him in the chest before they hopped off the wall and flew to take up position on the stand above him. Severus shook his head and sat in silence, seeing nothing. He hadn't felt this alone in over a year.

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When Severus next saw Hermione, she looked at him and paled before rushing away. He made certain to pay closer attention to her movements so they wouldn't easily cross paths after that. It was two weeks into his active avoidance of her that Coulson dropped by his temporary office, closing the door as he entered. Severus snorted humorously.

"Am I supposed to be afraid?" he asked as the other man approached his desk.

Taking a seat uninvited, Coulson sat back casually and crossed his legs before responding. "I didn't come here to play games, Snape. I thought I'd let you know that I've proposed to Hermione and she's accepted. I didn't want you to hear about it in the halls when we make it known to everyone else."

"How magnanimous of you," he sneered as he felt his heart stutter a bit. He'd known that she would most likely accept the other man's suit, but it still hurt to officially let go.

Coulson uncrossed his legs and sat forward. "Listen. She wanted to tell you herself, but you've managed to play least in sight when it comes to her, and she thinks that you don't want anything else to do with her." He gazed steadily at Severus and continued. "In all truth, I wouldn't mind it in the least if you continued to make yourself scarce, but Hermione misses your brand of friendship, and I don't enjoy seeing her unhappy."

"I don't enjoy seeing her unhappy either," Severus replied honestly. "I'll not seek her out, but I won't avoid her if she wants to speak with me. Will that suit?"

Coulson stood and leaned forward on the desk. "Yes, just one thing more. She's mine now, completely. You can have your friendship, but in all else, she's completely off-limits to you," he stated calmly with a smile that promised retribution in spades if he was crossed.

Severus stood as well and gave him the smile that had made even Bellatrix think twice before crossing him. "She may be yours, but if you hurt her, you will have earned my enmity."

Coulson straightened and held out his hand. Severus took it and they shook. "So glad we understand one another," he said, and exited the office, leaving Severus certain that he'd made the right choice.

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Severus made a point of being readily visible the rest of that day, so he wasn't surprised when Hermione finally plucked up her courage and approached him. He was sitting in the staff room drinking a cup of coffee while finishing up his current crossword puzzle.

She took the seat across from him and fidgeted a bit before speaking. "Erik told me that he spoke with you earlier," she said, the nervousness in her voice clearly evident.

Severus looked up and sighed. "Hermione, will you please relax, I'm not going to shout at you."

Placing her hands on the table in front of her, she shook her head. "Maybe you should. Shout at me, that is."

"What exactly will that accomplish?" Severus asked, leaning back in his seat.

"Oh, I don't know ... maybe it would make you feel better," Hermione mumbled, looking away.

"I'm pretty certain that it wouldn't, but thank you, all the same," he replied before returning his attention to his puzzle.

They sat there in the uncomfortable silence with Severus pointedly ignoring Hermione until she started to wring her hands. He reached out a hand without looking up and grasped them.

"Don't. As angry as I still am about how things happened, it still bothers me when you do that, so just don't." Looking up, he pulled her hands toward him and took in the ring that now adorned one of them.

"Marquise cut and a sizeable one at that. You must be pleased. I suppose congratulations are in order," he stated indifferently before releasing her and picking up his pen.

"Severus, I'm sorry," she said. "I know you don't want to hear it, but I never meant ..."

"Don't ... it was hard enough the last time."

"But I ..."

"No. We'll do this my way or not at all. I was really too permissive. When Coulson's formally courting you started to bother me, I should have said something instead of waiting for you to broach the subject. I was trying to avoid another argument over interference, but I would have done better to have risked it. Our friendship had become unequal by that point. Friendship isn't about always letting the other person have what they want ... I've finally learned that," Severus stated calmly as he gathered his things and stood. "You once told me that you needed time to get over yourself, even though you claimed to have forgiven me. I granted that request. Now, I'm calling in the debt. You'll have to allow me the same courtesy."

"All right. I can do that," Hermione whispered sadly, sliding her chair back to stand as well.

Nodding, Severus headed towards the door, stopping at the threshold before speaking. "I plan on attending Astoria's fundraiser for the Hogwarts Scholarship Fund on the twenty-eighth. If you'd like, we'll speak more at that time." Without waiting for a response, he strode out into the corridor and headed for the nearest Floo.

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The final round of trials ended with November's full moon. They now had a version of the suppression potion that worked for ninety-nine per cent of the sampled werewolf population. Severus had completely buried himself in research, to the exclusion of all else, and succeeded in developing a separate potion that cut down on sensitivity to moonstone. It was designed to be taken the day before so as not to interfere with the suppression potion when it was administered. There was still one per cent that still had a mild, but medically acceptable reaction even with the additional remedy, so he still would not call it a complete success.

But, just as Coulson had desired, the werewolf population at large would get their early Christmas present. The Potter-Malfoy Trust, along with other supporting charities would be footing the bill for potion manufacture and distribution to every werewolf they could find. They would even fund the testing for individual moonstone sensitivity and the corrective potion when needed. It wasn't a full cure, but it was the best thing that had come about since the end of the war in Severus' opinion.

On the friendship front, he and Hermione had taken small, slow steps towards repairing theirs, with the support of Potter, Weasley and Astoria Malfoy. The things he had said and the things that she had done had been equally hurtful, so it was taking some time, but they were starting to regain their easy camaraderie.

Currently, they were all attending the celebration that was being held on behalf of the researchers responsible for the success of the suppression potion. Awards had been presented, dinner had been served and currently, Severus watched as Coulson led Hermione in a waltz. She was glowing and had a spark that he hadn't witnessed since before the end of her Sixth year at Hogwarts. He was glad to see it. He was jolted from his reverie by the crowd that had just shown up to take seats at his table.

"Did she ask you already?" Weasley said as he made certain that a noticeably pregnant Marissa was comfortable before he took his own chair.

"Yes, she asked me," he answered with a suffering sigh.

"You did say yes?" Potter chimed in merrily.

"Yes, I said yes!" he snapped in mock annoyance. "Now go bother someone else."

They laughed and left him to entertain Marissa while they went to collect drinks.

"She had Molly and her mother up in arms when she told them that she wanted both you and Harry as her witnesses," Marissa said casually as she looked out at the couples on the dance floor.

"She's always done things her own way," he replied, watching Hermione laugh at something Coulson appeared to have whispered in her ear.

Severus smiled when she spun away from her fiancé and realised she was making her way towards him. He stood to greet her.

"Hello, Hermione. You're looking lovely, as usual."

"Oh, please leave off with the small-talk, Severus. I want to hear the details on the fellowship grant you received," Hermione said excitedly as she sat, pulling him down with her.

Severus turned to Marissa and addressed her solemnly. "I'm afraid I'm being shanghaied."

"Severus Snape ... just answer the poor woman before she bursts. I'm too tired to keep up with you two," Marissa said with a laugh.

"You heard her, so tell me."

"I've been authorised to author a textbook series based upon my Defence manuscript, if you really must know."

"Oh, dear, you'll bury yourself and we won't see you until it's completed," Hermione said with a mock sigh.

"Pot, kettle," he retorted, enjoying the repartee as Hermione matched him. Although he hadn't managed to keep the girl this time either, he had learned to recognise true friendship, and he knew that he wasn't so damaged that he couldn't be a real friend to those who had earned his trust. That number might be few, but he wouldn't settle for less.

He had a promising career ahead with regard to his Defence manuscript, and now that he was done with his part of the project, he was free to travel and explore the opportunities that awaited him. And when he came home, he would have friends ... something that he'd never really had before. He was no longer alone in the world and the thought of that made his soul soar. There was hope.

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