

Work Release

by phoenix

Victims from a late war poisoning attack have one hope of survival - incarcerated Death Eater Severus Snape. Can he be convinced to not only help save them, but to work with Hermione Granger to do so?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 8

Victims from a late war poisoning attack have one hope of survival - incarcerated Death Eater Severus Snape. Can he be convinced to not only help save them, but to work with Hermione Granger to do so?

A/N: This story was begun before the Deathly Hallows was released. After that, I kind of lost the will to continue with this AU fic. It is canon compliant through Half-Blood Prince, but for those of us who don't completely agree with the direction JKR took, this will be a breath of fresh air. I have tried to incorporate most of the events from Deathly Hallows, but the following are going to be ignored: Snape having been bitten by Nagini and apparently dying and Snape giving his memories to Harry. The presumption is that he was captured on the Death Eater side of the battle at the end, though no one can really give any testimony as to what he did during the battle, he was presumed guilty by association and for the murder of Albus Dumbledore, so he was imprisoned.

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Chapter 1

Staring at the cell door, Hermione knew what she had to do. It was the last thing she wanted to do. Yes, the Minister said it was necessary. Even Harry had agreed it was necessary. But Hermione did not want to go into that cell.

Technically she was an adult now, but she knew the second she was assaulted by that searing, condescending voice, she would once again become the eleven-year-old Muggleborn school girl who was never good enough. Out of all teachers, she had never, ever, been able to earn his approval or to solicit one single complement from him. Not one.

She stopped just shy of the door and waited for the guard to open the cell with keys and his wand. While she waited, she took several deep breaths. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out... She was strong and she could do this. She would be the one in charge this time. She was an adult, very accomplished in her field, and he was no longer her teacher. He was nothing more than a prisoner. Of course, the fact that she needed to be here at all bothered her. Her books had failed her. They did not hold the answer. Only the man inside the cell held the answer.

Once again, she rehearsed what she wanted to say. For days she had agonized over what she could say to show him he no longer had the power to intimidate her. She hadn't yet managed to convince even herself, as the magic mirror in her room constantly told her.

"Quit being so nervous," she chided herself quietly. "If you get worked up, he'll see your weakness and pounce on it. This isn't his dungeon classroom, and he's not in charge this time. You are!" This was just the sort of mental reassurance she needed. "Besides, the sooner you get this over with, the sooner you can leave this dismal rock." Even with the Dementors gone, Azkaban was a horrid place, one which she hoped never to visit again.

Finally having worked up her courage, she entered the cell and heard the guard close it behind her.

Severus lay on his bunk, staring at the ceiling trying to decipher any pattern in the rocks. It was how he spent most of his days. After all, there was very little to do at Azkaban. They had deemed him so dangerous he had been placed in an isolation cell. This was also partly for his protection, since many of his former associates viewed him as a traitor once word of his participation in the Order of the Phoenix had been revealed at his trial.

Unfortunately, there was more evidence of him being a Death Eater than being on the side of the light, and with no Albus Dumbledore to vouch for him this time, he had been sent to Azkaban.

For the seven hundred and thirty-first time, he contemplated the inequity of his life. He had risked more, sacrificed more than anyone else in the wizarding world to prevent Voldemort from rising to power, twice, and he was still incarcerated.

Even Minerva had abandoned him. While he had not expected Lupin or the Weasleys to stand up for him, he had at least expected Minerva to defend him, to believe his accounting of events. After all, they had been friends and colleagues for more than fifteen years. He had been closer to her than any of the other teachers, more than anyone save Albus. That made her silence even more painful.

He hadn't expected to be hailed as a hero, truthfully, he didn't *want* to be hailed as a hero. Publicity was something he was never interested in. He hadn't even expected any public notice at all, really. All he had wanted, all he'd hoped for, was to quietly go on with his life. Teaching at Hogwarts would probably be out of the question, which is why he had been scrupulously saving money. His plan had been to live quietly at Spinner's End for a few years and offer his skills as a Potions master. Worst case, he would offer to teach at Durmstrang, but he felt he could survive without demeaning himself like that.

Instead, he had been sentenced to life in Azkaban. As young as he was, he would be here for a very long time.

As he heard the cell door opening, his eyes snapped to see who it was. His meal was not due for hours, and no one visited prisoners in Azkaban. Squinting his eyes against the brighter light of the corridor, he tried to make out his visitor. Whoever his visitor was, he or she was shorter and more slightly built than his guards, and, from the shape, obviously a woman.

"Granger?" he asked as he finally determined his visitor's identity. She was one of the last people he had expected to see, and he wondered if he was losing his mind. It was inevitable for someone in solitary confinement, and he was surprised it had taken this long.

"Snape, you are to be temporarily released to aid in the analysis and development of an antidote to a toxic potion," she said without preamble.

Propping himself on his elbow, he tried to comprehend what she was saying. "What?"

This was obviously not the question she had anticipated as it took her a few seconds to answer. "Your assistance is required to decipher a potion. You will provide it."

He found it strange that the Ministry would require his assistance. Even stranger that they would send her. It was obvious that she must be the one working on the potion right now and that as bright as she was, the solution must elude her. "Why should I?" he replied lackadaisically as he lay back on his bunk. He'd always been contrary; furthermore, it had always been ridiculously easy to fluster Granger.

"It is your duty to do as the Ministry requires," she stated simply.

"Or what? I am in solitary confinement in Azkaban. What more could they do to me?" he snapped. Surely she must have something to offer him to gain his cooperation. The Ministry would not be naïve enough to believe that he would blindly cooperate.

"Your case will be reconsidered in light of your cooperation."

He knew that was an empty promise. Yes, they would reconsider his case, but they would come to the same verdict. His response was to roll over and turn his back to her.

Clearly flustered, she replied, "You have a duty." When he did not respond, she continued, "There is a possibility you will be pardoned. ~~A~~*strong* possibility."

"But that also means there is a possibility I will not. I believe that is more likely." The Ministry would find it far more convenient if he simply disappeared into the mists of Azkaban prison.

She was silent a long time before responding. "After what you did, the Ministry cannot guarantee your release..."

He turned back to her and was on his feet towering over her in a flash. "What I did? The fools at the Ministry, and the wizarding world, have not taken the time to understand what I did. Without me..." He seemed to realize the futility of his argument and sank back down on his bed, shoulders slumped in what she would have called despair, had it been anyone else.

Her curiosity piqued, she asked, "Without you, what?"

"It doesn't matter." His voice dropped almost to a whisper.

Pity flashed in her eyes. "It might. Tell me."

For a moment he looked into her eyes, weighing his options. Finally, he looked away. "I don't want your pity."

Insulted, she snapped back, "Fine. Rot in your cell." Spinning on her heel, she marched to the door and pounded on it with her fist three times to notify the guard to let her out.

"Stubborn man. I told them this would be a waste of time," she muttered. She was nearly out of the building when she stopped. She couldn't leave without securing his cooperation. There was no one else who could help unravel the potion and people would die. Closing her eyes, she knew she had to go back to the Ministry and convince them they would have to pardon Snape. She didn't like the idea of Dumbledore's murderer going free, but they had little choice. Besides, other Death Eaters had been pardoned for cooperating with the Ministry despite the crimes they had committed.

Once she had returned to the mainland, she Apparated straight to the Ministry. There was no time to waste. Besides, they would soon know that she had failed. She might as well deliver the news in person and see if she could find another way to secure his cooperation.

By the time she arrived at the Minister's office, he, the head of St. Mungo's and the head of Magical Law Enforcement were waiting for her. She had the eerie feeling they already knew what had transpired.

"Well?" asked Minister Arthur Weasley.

She hated telling him she had failed since he always had so much faith in her. "I'm sorry. He wouldn't agree to help."

"What do you mean?" asked Alastor Gumbail. "You did explain the situation to him, didn't you?"

"As much as he would listen. He doesn't see a reason to help, and I have to agree with him. We all know the Ministry promise to review his case is meaningless. And he

saw the same thing."

"Now, Hermione..." started Arthur.

"Mr. Weasley, I may be young, but I'm not naïve. And neither is he. Unless we have something more tangible to offer him, he won't help."

"Arthur," said Healer Smethwyck, "Time is running out. We are doing what we can for those affected, but they only have a few days left, if we are lucky."

Arthur closed his eyes and rubbed his nose. "Alastor?"

Gumboil leaned back in his chair. "I don't like it any more than you do, Arthur."

"Mr. Weasley, I don't think we have a choice," implored Hermione.

Smethwyck added, "You already know that my Potions brewers have been able to do nothing, and Miss Granger has admitted this is beyond her. She is the brightest Potions brewer I know, save Snape."

"Who might even have brewed this potion," snapped Gumboil.

"Yes, yes. We've been over that," replied an exasperated Arthur.

"I still say a good dose of Veritaserum would solve this whole problem," Gumboil muttered, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

"But only if he knows the potion. It won't do any good if he didn't brew it. I won't authorize it." Arthur sat quietly contemplating what to do next.

"Mr. Weasley," Hermione prompted.

Once again he rubbed the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "I know."

Gumboil protested, "We can't pardon him. He killed Dumbledore."

"There were extenuating circumstances brought up at his trial, and you know it," Arthur said.

"And they were dismissed as the drivel they are. Surely you don't believe them. We have already let enough Death Eaters get away with having supported You-Know-Who," Gumboil slammed his fist on the desk as he displayed his emotions.

"Then what is one more?" snapped Arthur. They all looked surprised at his outburst. "My apologies. This isn't an easy decision, and I know that it will not be popular. The public would have loved to see him given to the Dementors if we still had them. But we don't have a choice."

"You pardon him and your popularity will plummet. They will scream for your resignation," Gumboil said.

"It's a price I'm willing to pay. I can't let those people die. If word gets out that they might have been saved, the screaming will be just as loud, and I will have no defense." He pulled a piece of parchment out of his desk and began writing. When he was done, he tapped it with his wand and handed it to Hermione. "If he is successful in brewing an antidote, he will be pardoned."

Gumboil looked disgusted.

Hermione took the parchment. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. This should be what it takes to convince him to work with me." She suppressed a shudder at the thought of having to work with Snape. Though she had to admit he had looked quite broken and had not been his usual self.

She glanced at the parchment one last time before the ferry arrived. She had such conflicting feelings about Severus Snape. She had been at his trial, seen the evidence presented, but the Ministry's case against him had been strong. A part of her wanted to believe his version of events, believe that he had been doing Dumbledore's bidding, that pardoning him was the right thing to do, but another part of her was disgusted that he was going to be released. In the end, ironically, she knew it would be for the Greater Good to save those who had been poisoned.

Once aboard the small ferry, she pulled her cloak tightly around herself. While the weather was not actually all that cold and the ferry was magically protected to keep visitors warm and dry, she still could not help the feeling of cold and despair that permeated her every cell as she approached the forbidding prison.

After checking in at the warden's office and showing him the new paperwork, she was once again escorted by one of the guards to Snape's cell.

This time she did not hesitate once the guard opened his cell door. She snapped the piece of parchment in his face. "Are you coming or do you still want to rot here?" she said harshly. She knew she was being rude, but she was afraid that if she wasn't, she'd lose her nerve and any authority in the situation. Being forceful was best. He needed to know that she was in charge.

He lazily took the parchment from her hands and read it carefully several times.

"As I'm sure you can tell, it is a magically binding contract," she said impatiently, eager to be away from the prison, though unfortunately she would not be away from Snape.

Standing up, he replied, "I shall assist you."

"Good," she replied tersely and walked out of the cell, leaving him to follow her. As they walked down the dock, she could hear him struggling to keep up, but she refused to slow down to accommodate him. This was one more way of letting him know what his place was.

When she got to the ferry landing, he was breathing hard and had fallen several paces behind her, his time in Azkaban clearly having taken a physical toll on him. She tapped her foot impatiently while she waited for him. They didn't speak to each other on the ferry ride back to the mainland. Once there, she took hold of his arm. "Hold still," she ordered as she prepared to Side-Along Apparate him to the safe house.

"Where are..." He didn't get to finish as she Apparated them away.

"This house is magically protected to prevent you from escaping. You will also find that wandless magic will be of little use." She pointed down the hallway to her right. "Your room is at the end of the hall. Clothing and toiletries have been provided for you. You have ten minutes to shower and change and meet me here," Hermione said tersely upon arrival. Once she was alone in the living room, she sat on the nearest chair as she felt her knees would no longer bear her weight. Being rude and forceful was not in her nature, especially to someone who had once been in a position of authority over her. She also suspected that it would be counterproductive to maintain her brusque and forceful attitude with him; surely, showing him at least a measure of respect would make it easier to work with him. And she knew she would be working closely with him for however long it took to find the antidote. She sighed. Obviously being at Azkaban had brought out the worst in her.

She perked back up when he emerged from his room, looking and smelling better. "The laboratory is this way," she said, trying to take some of the previous iciness out of her voice as she led him to the other side of the house. Once there she handed him a piece of parchment. "This is the list of symptoms the victims have shown. Do you recognize the potion from this?"

He read through the list. "No. This matches no potion that I brewed."

She was both disappointed and relieved. A part of her had hoped it was his potion so that an antidote could easily be determined, but the other part of her thought that this validated his story of being a reluctant Death Eater, that he had not participated in their most heinous crimes. Handing him a notebook, she said, "This is everything that the Healers and I have observed about this poison and what we have done to try to counteract it. The worst patients only have a few more days to live, so time is of the essence."

He started reading through the notebook. After a few minutes, he asked, "Are you going to hover over my shoulder the whole time we are obliged to work together?"

She was surprised that his question wasn't more scathing. His discouragement, which she had interpreted as despair, was the real oddity in this surreal situation, and his question sounded more Snape-like than anything else he had said to date. Without replying she moved to the other side of the room and sat on the chair, still watching him, trying to understand him.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 8

Severus and Hermione work together to develop an antidote by a vicious poison administered by Death Eaters during the waning days of the war.

Chapter 2

Snape perused the notes as he considered his situation. He had temporarily traded one prison for another, though he had to admit this one was more pleasant. He had his own room, with a real bed and bath, clean clothes and presumably decent food. At the end of this project, he would win his freedom, though he wasn't sure what that meant. He was sure the wizarding world still reviled him for his role in Dumbledore's death the foolish old man hadn't even left a record of the plan, sentencing him to a fate worse than death and his vault had been confiscated for reparations. That left him with nothing and no job prospects.

It suddenly occurred to him that while the document assured his freedom, there was one thing it did not ensure. As he finished his review of the notes, he closed the books and turned to face Hermione. "I have several theories, but there is one more thing I require."

"You aren't in a position to bargain," she replied sternly as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"But you see, I am. I may be the only one who can brew an antidote. I want assurances my wand will be returned to me," he stated bluntly.

"You have been given your freedom."

He crossed his arms, signaling his unwillingness to budge. "But what is freedom to a wizard without a wand? My price for my cooperation is my wand when this is over. With that, I will have my status as a full wizard reinstated. Without it, I will be every bit as much a prisoner as I was at Azkaban." While he knew about the Muggle world and probably could have lived within it, that was not what he wanted, that was not who he was.

"Fine. Start work and I'll owl the Minister," she relented.

He knew that starting work without the assurances was a risk, but one he had to take. Some of the steps to the antidotes he had in mind were time consuming. Getting the Minister's approval might take hours, hours that might make the difference between life and death for the patients he was trying to save. Hours that could make the difference between freedom and life in Azkaban for him.

When Hermione left the lab, he inventoried the ingredients in the laboratory and made a list of the ones he would need that were not stocked. Some were exotic and some were controlled, but he had no doubt that Hermione would have no trouble procuring them. He still found it odd that she, of all people, had been placed in charge of this project, but thinking back to the student she had been at Hogwarts, he had to acknowledge her brilliance, no matter how deeply that acknowledgement bit. After all, she had saved Longbottom's potion on more than one occasion, and only someone with a deeply intuitive grasp of potions could have done that.

She returned and began to hover again as he prepared the various bases he thought might be useful. He tried not to get annoyed by her behavior because he knew that she did not trust him. As he considered this, he had a stroke of brilliance. If he could get her to trust him, to be an advocate for him, it might prove useful. After all, she was like a daughter to the Minister and a sister to St. Harry Potter. But he couldn't be too obvious about it because she would become suspicious if he changed his personality too much.

"I should hear back from the Minister in a few hours," she replied matter of factly when he looked up from his work.

"Thank you." Handing her the list, he said, "These are some supplies that I require. I know that some of them may be difficult to obtain..." He let his voice trail off.

She took the list and read through it quickly. "I can get them. Just a reminder, this place is warded. You can't get out."

"That is not my intention. I have agreed to work on the antidote, and that is what I will do. Whatever you may think of me, I am a man of my word. ~~Foolish old man~~, he said bitterly to himself as he thought of his promise to Dumbledore. It was because he was a man of his word that Dumbledore was dead. He had been willing to forfeit his life so that Dumbledore would have lived, but the old headmaster had insisted that Severus's life was more valuable. And what had keeping his word gotten him? A life sentence to Azkaban Prison, that's what.

She eyed him skeptically before departing.

While she was gone, he finished the bases and began outlining theories for several different potions. Normally he would have demanded to see the patients, but he knew that access to them would be limited. At least Hermione's notes had been extremely detailed and comprehensive. He wasn't sure exactly who had brewed this potion, but he was incredibly relieved it was not one of his own creation. He was sure that fact would make returning his wand more palatable to the Minister. He had a few theories about who might have brewed the poison. Unfortunately, none of those he suspected were alive, so it was likely to remain a mystery.

After almost four hours, Hermione returned. In that time Severus had gotten the potions to states where he needed the ingredients he had sent her to get. He had then explored his new prison. There were two bedrooms he supposed the second was for her and a reasonably well stocked kitchen along with a main room that served as both the living and dining areas. He made a sandwich while waiting for her, not wanting to get involved in cooking a meal since he had no idea how much time he had before her return.

"That's everything," she said as she set several bags down on the table.

Leaning over, he casually rifled through them for a few moments. "You've done an excellent job." He picked up the bags and took them to the laboratory. Unsurprisingly, she followed him. "If you wouldn't mind, I could use some assistance."

"You?" she asked skeptically.

"As you said, time is of the essence, and as I do not know the exact composition of the poison, I have a number of possible antidotes to prepare. I have written instructions for several of them in case you would be willing to assist."

She stood rooted to the spot, dumfounded.

"Miss Granger?" he asked cautiously.

Finally recovered from the shock, she replied, "Of course. Where would you like me to start?"

He pointed at the right side of the workbench. "You may begin with that one. I believe the instructions are quite clear, but if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. We cannot afford to make mistakes."

As Hermione set about the task he had assigned her, she started wondering about Snape. Since he had accepted the pardon, he had not acted like the Snape she recalled. He seemed quite human, unlike the great bat of the dungeon. It was reasonable to expect his stay in Azkaban to have changed him, and he had been every bit as rude as she had expected on her first visit, but the man working beside her? He seemed like someone else all together.

While stirring the cauldron the requisite amount of time, she considered that she had only known Snape as a teacher. The other teachers hadn't seemed to hate him, and she did recall Harry telling her about Dumbledore defending Snape, not to mention Remus had encouraged them to trust Snape. It was possible that Snape outside the classroom was a different person. And he had always been quite polite towards the Slytherins, so it wasn't as though he couldn't be nice.

She ran out of time to consider the complexities of Severus Snape as the potion she was making required all her attention. She lost complete track of time as she moved between the different cauldrons and assisted Snape as he required it. From time to time he would look over her shoulder to check her work and ask if she had any questions. Not once was he rude and out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw him give her an approving nod.

As she finished the twelfth step of the third potion, he said, "I believe the potions can sit for a few hours. The rest would do us both much good."

She looked at her watch and saw that it was nearly half past three in the morning, and she suddenly felt the weariness of a long day of work wash over her. "Are you sure? I can still work," she said through a stifled yawn.

"Miss Granger, we absolutely cannot afford any mistakes. There is plenty of time to finish the potions even if we take a few hours rest."

"I suppose you're right. Seven o'clock?" She placed her hand over her mouth as she yawned again.

"Eight would be better. And I think we should also eat something before bed to ensure a restful slumber." He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her out of the laboratory.

As she slid into one of the chairs at the table in the little kitchen, she noticed a letter on the table, addressed to her. Opening it, she saw that Arthur had agreed that Snape would have his wand returned to him if he succeeded. She knew how much this would probably cost him politically, but hopefully, saving all those people would help everyone forget about Snape. "Minister Weasley has agreed you can have your wand back," she said as he placed a sandwich before her and then sat down across from her.

"That is most wise," he replied, feeling a small measure of relief. Now all he had to do was successfully counteract the poison.

After taking a couple of bites, she asked, "Do you really think you can save them?"

"Without knowing the exact composition of the poison or who brewed it, I cannot say for certain. I am doing my best."

"Did You-Know-Who have many other potion brewers?" she asked.

"A few that I knew of. There could be more about whom I did not know. While he trusted me, he trusted no one completely." That was the simple truth. Noticing she had finished eating, he said, "I know that you have many questions, but perhaps those can wait until later. It is most important that we rest. I apologize for leaving the dishes to you."

"What? Oh." She lazily waved her wand and the dishes flew to the sink where they cleaned themselves and then stacked themselves in the cupboard. "I understand. Well, goodnight," she said as they departed to their own rooms. Once in her room, she kicked off her shoes, flopped on her bed and had a moment to wonder why she had wished him goodnight before sleep overtook her.

Severus was awake earlier than planned and was eager to resume his work. While he did not relish the idea of disturbing Hermione from her much needed rest, he knew that she would be upset if went to work without her. Besides, he really did need her assistance. There was just far too much work for him to complete it by himself in time. Entering her room, he quietly moved to her bedside and gently shook her shoulder. "Miss Granger." When she did nothing more than moan softly, he shook a little harder and said a little louder, "Miss Granger."

Her sole reaction was to pull the pillow over her head.

Removing the pillow, he said sharply, "Hermione!"

She sat up abruptly, hitting Severus's forehead with hers. He rubbed the spot, trying to ease the pain.

"Ow! What is it?" she asked crossly, also rubbing her forehead.

"Forgive me for waking you, but it is time to get back to work." He observed her for a few seconds. If he had thought her hair was normally bushy, it was positively wild now. It was slightly flattened on the left side where she had been laying and the back stuck up rather more than usual leaving her looking like a deranged poodle, and he fought hard not to laugh.

"What? Work? Oh! Right, right. I need a few minutes to shower and grab something to eat. Meet you in the lab in fifteen minutes?"

Relieved that her brain seemed to be regaining function, he replied, "I have already seen to my needs and will resume my work." Not long after he left her room, he could hear the shower running. To expedite her arrival in the laboratory, he placed some fruit, cereal, the milk pitcher and a mug of coffee on the table for her. He also considered that this small act of kindness would help improve her opinion of him. He then retired to the lab to continue his potions' brewing.

As Hermione stood under the shower, she tried to clear her mind, knowing that she would need all of her concentration to work on the potions. Brewing one potion at a time

was difficult, but working on three simultaneously was nearly impossible. As she washed her hair, she considered Snape. He had been polite, courteous and even complimentary. She wondered what it meant, or what he might be up to.

But what would he gain from being nice to her? Nothing. If he cured the patients, he was assured his freedom and his wand. Was it possible he was capable of being nice when there was nothing to be gained? And he had used her first name. She actually liked the way it sounded.

"Quit thinking about him," she chided. The last thing she needed right now was the distraction that trying to figure out Severus Snape.

After rinsing the last of the soap off her body, she quickly dried and dressed, pulling her hair into a ponytail so that she wouldn't have to deal with it or have it in her way. When she walked through the kitchen, she saw her breakfast laid out on the table and stopped dead in her tracks. Her first thought was that she obviously did not know the real Severus Snape and that perhaps he would be worth getting to know.

She ate her breakfast quickly and cleaned up the dishes. When she walked into the laboratory, he was hunched over one of the cauldrons. She began organizing her work area while keeping an eye on him to see when he finished the step of his potion. When he finished, she said, "Thank you for breakfast."

"I thought it best so that you could get to work as soon as possible," he replied simply.

She chided herself for thinking it had been something more. Snape was practical and that's all the gesture was. Without preamble, she immersed herself in her potions, knowing that they had to finish them by the end of the day.

Severus was quite impressed at her skills. She had always been quite good about following directions, and it seemed that had not changed. And she hadn't been at all annoying. Of course, she was working by herself, not trying to pull Potter and Weasley along with her. He still didn't see what she had seen in those two for them to form such a close friendship. He was well aware that the boys were likely drawn to her intellect and her willingness to help them. Oh, yes, he had known that she helped them it had been quite clear in their essays.

Was she really that starved for attention and friendship that she would give away her most important asset? A part of him wondered what had happened to the other two members of the Golden Trio, and if they were still riding her coattails. He hoped not. She deserved better than either of them. She deserved a fellow intellectual, someone like him.

Quit it, you lecherous old man. You're old enough to be her father, and she'd never be interested in someone like you. He chided. He must be having those thoughts because she was the first remotely pretty and nice woman he had seen since being sent to Azkaban.

The potion he was working on required time to stabilize, and while he waited, he watched her out of the corner of his eye. She was rather good looking. Womanhood suited her quite nicely. Her hair was a little wild and unruly, but who was he to judge someone on the state of their hair?

He forced his attention back to his work. Thinking about her would not solve problems, only create them, and if he didn't finish these potions, it would be a moot point because he would be on his way back to Azkaban.

One by one he finished his potions. Noticing she was still working, he asked, "Hermione, is there anything I can do to assist you?"

She looked him, dumbfounded, for several seconds. "You called me Hermione."

"That is your name, is it not? And you are no longer my student. If it offends I you, I shall call you Miss Granger."

"No. I'm not offended," she said, slightly embarrassed. "It's fine if you call me Hermione. I just wasn't expecting it." He arched an eyebrow at her and she continued. "Oh, help." She fumbled with the pieces of parchment on the workbench. "Here. This one needs the last two steps. I'm almost done with the others."

He waited a beat, and then suggested, "You may call me Severus if you wish. In fact, I would prefer that, I believe."

He moved to the cauldron and noticed that she had all the ingredients organized and measured next to the cauldron. He had never really paid that much attention to how she brewed potions and was impressed with her organization.

"Thank you, Severus," she said, his name slightly unfamiliar on her tongue.

"Not at all," he replied politely, knowing it would serve to gain her trust. "May I enquire what the next step is, after the potions are complete?"

She stopped and looked up from her work. "I intended on taking them to St. Mungo's where they would be administered to the patients."

"May I accompany you? There may be subtle modifications that need to be made to whichever potion we determine is the correct one. And there is a certain order in which they need to be administered or it could be fatal. If I am able to be there, it would save time, which may be of the essence."

She looked uncomfortable as she determined how to answer him. "I'm not sure that would be a good idea. You being seen at St. Mungo's... We've managed to keep your release until now. It would be... Well... The wizarding world doesn't trust you," she finished bluntly.

"Perhaps a sealed Floo connection to the ward where the patients are quarantined? No one would need know that I am there, save the patients themselves. And their caregivers, of course."

She considered his suggestion for several seconds before saying, "I suppose that would work. I'll send an owl once I've finished."

She completed her potions and left to send the owl. Before she could return to the laboratory, he joined her in the kitchen. "Everything is ready for transport."

"Then we're just waiting on the Minister," she replied and looked down at her hands folded before her on the table.

To break the uncomfortable silence, she asked, "What will you do?" When he didn't immediately answer, she added, "I mean, assuming this works, you'll be free. What will you do?"

He leaned back in the chair. "I have not had time to give it much thought. I know that it is unlikely I will be welcome here in Britain since Albus did not see fit to leave a record of our agreement at least not one that anyone has found."

"You really it was on his orders?" she asked, leaning forward slightly with her head tilted slightly.

Her reaction hardly surprised him, but she seemed genuinely interested. "Indeed it was. But as I am sure you have discovered, he does not always give people all the information he had on a subject. He was a most exasperating man to deal with," he said as he poured out the tea she had brewed.

She twisted the cup in her hand. "Yes, we did learn that." She thought back to his strange gifts and the utter lack of information he had given Harry about where to find the Horcruxes, or his own past. "It is possible he did leave that information somewhere. I mean he can't have wanted you to suffer, be locked for life in Azkaban. He testified on your behalf last time."

"Unfortunately, that is not something I had time to pursue. While Headmaster at Hogwarts, I was closely watched by my fellow Death Eaters. Searching for something that

would exonerate me would have drawn the wrong sort of attention. I had hoped he had left something with Minerva or one of the other members of the Order." He truly had been disappointed that a man who had so carefully planned so many things over the years would have abandoned him. After all that he had done for Dumbledore, he had thought a memory, a sealed letter, something would have been left behind.

"We could search Hogwarts. That would be the logical place he would have left something like that," she said eagerly.

He laughed weakly. "Even pardoned, do you honestly believe they would let me anywhere near the school? It was my last residence. I'm sure they would fear that I have dark artifacts stored there and would want to retrieve them and continue the Dark Lord's work."

She frowned at his use of 'Dark Lord'. "Well, I could go search. No one would question me going to Hogwarts."

"No, they probably wouldn't, but they would question you wanting to search the school," he replied pointedly.

She thought a moment. "I could say I'm going there to talk to Dumbledore's portrait. Perhaps his portrait could provide some answers," she said hopefully.

"Minerva asked it and got no reply on the subject." At least that was what she had told the Wizengamot, and he had no reason not to believe her. She had been shocked and disappointed to hear that he had killed Albus. Surely she would have wanted an explanation. After all, they had been friends while he taught there.

Hermione sat contemplatively for a few moments. "No response? So he didn't answer Professor McGonagall's question?"

"He spoke very little while I occupied that office. And Minerva was not officially the Headmistress so he was under no obligation to speak with her." It still annoyed him that he had been played the pawn, even during his tenure as headmaster.

"But he was under obligation to speak to you and didn't."

"The portraits are only under obligation to assist the current Headmaster with regards to the school. Even if she had been Headmistress, he would have been under no obligation to answer a question pertaining to my innocence."

"I can't believe he would do that to you," she said, aghast.

"If half of what Rita Skeeter said is true, there is much that all of us did not know about him. For more than fifteen years I was a pawn to him. Once my usefulness was at an end..." He let his voice trail off, letting her come to the same conclusion he had.

"Well, I'm going to talk to him when this is over," she determinedly.

He chuckled derisively. "Good luck."

An owl flying in the window interrupted their conversation. Hermione took the letter it offered. After reading it, she said, "Let me go ahead and ensure no one is in the ward. Follow after five minutes."

Severus forced himself to sit patiently while he waited for the five minutes to elapse. He then moved to the fireplace, threw the Floo powder into it and said "Unknown Poisons Ward, St. Mungo's" as he stepped into the green flames.

When he arrived, he brushed the soot off his shoulders before noticing one of the Healers and Hermione standing there waiting on him, holding the potion's case.

"Where should we begin?" asked the Healer without bothering to introduce himself.

Glancing around the full ward, he said, "It would be best to start with the patient who is strongest. Some of these potions will be more taxing than others."

The Healer led him to the bedside of a young woman. "She was the last victim."

The Healer took a couple of steps back, but still watched intently as Severus examined the patient briefly before deciding which potion to administer first.

Hermione watched him silently, willing him to succeed. Not only did she want these who were the final victims of the war to recover, but she wanted it for Severus. She couldn't say why, but she had an uncanny feeling that he was telling the truth about why he killed Dumbledore. While it was possible she could prove his innocence while he was in Azkaban, she had a feeling that it would take both of them working together to find the proof.

She crossed her arms and chewed nervously on her fingernails. The first potion yielded no reaction. After the second the woman started twitching, she watched as Severus pulled a small phial out of the bag and administered it to her. The patient immediately calmed. Hermione wanted to ask him how it was going, but the look of concentration on his face told her that she should not interrupt him.

He pulled out the third potion and, using the supplies he had brought with him, made some modifications to it before giving it to the woman.

She held her breath because she recognized it as one she had worked on. She desperately hoped she hadn't made any errors even though her work had always been perfect before.

After a few seconds the woman gasped, inhaling deeply, and Hermione closed her eyes, fearing the worst.

Severus said softly, "Hermione."

She opened her eyes and looked over at him. The patient was looking around, trying to determine where she was. The Healer moved to her bedside as Severus stepped away.

"How do you feel?" the Healer asked gently.

"Wh-where...?" the woman asked weakly.

"You're in St. Mungo's." The Healer waved his wand over the woman to cast a diagnostic spell. He smiled warmly as she grasped the woman's hand. "You're going to be fine."

Relief rushed through Hermione to know that she had brewed the potion perfectly. She looked behind her and saw that Severus was already starting to treat the other patients in the ward.

She followed the attending Healer in Severus's wake, reassuring the patients as they regained consciousness. It didn't take long for him to finish administering the antidote, and Severus did his best to blend into the background of the room. She moved to stand before him. "That was wonderful. Thank you."

"I am no longer needed here. I should leave before more medical personnel come back to the ward to assist with patient care," he said quietly, trying to remain in the shadows.

Her elation waned slightly. "Oh, yes, of course. This is a Floo direct connection. Just say 'safe house'." He was gone before she could say anything else.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 8

With the poisoning victims saved, Hermione turns her sights to discovering the truth about Severus' role in the war.

Chapter 3

Severus paced the main room. He knew that she wouldn't be long, and he needed time to collect his thoughts. He rationalized that how he felt towards Hermione was just manufactured in his mind since she was the first person who had been nice to him in years. He had spent six years belittling and tormenting her, there was no way she could like a man like him. Or could she?

Why else would she offer to help prove his innocence, something she shouldn't have believed in given his prior attitude towards her. But she had. She believed he was innocent and was now focusing her keen intellect on proving that.

"It's just another mystery to be solved," he muttered. "A puzzle. Another cause. Nothing more. She has no personal interest in me." His rambling was cut short as the Floo roared to life for Hermione.

"You didn't have to leave so abruptly," she said shortly after stepping through the fire.

"I thought the less attention I drew the better. You seemed to indicate that was the fact," he replied pointedly.

"Well, yes," she replied sheepishly. "I just wanted to thank you for what you did. Your potions were brilliant. The ideas in them... How did you come up with those combinations?"

This was not something he wanted to think about. "In order to truly understand antidotes to poisons, one must have an excellent understanding of poisons."

"Right," she said quietly.

"*That* is why none of you were able to devise an antidote." He turned away from her, feeling unworthy of the praise she had given him.

Changing the subject, she said, "Well, I'll go see Mr. Weasley and get your wand back. Then we can make plans for finding any testimony or memories Dumbledore might have left behind."

Severus turned around and snapped, "Did you not hear what I just said? I have brewed poisons, heinous poisons, poisons that have killed people." He could not believe she could shrug off his past so easily.

She crossed her arms and held her ground before him. "Yes, I heard. Had you refused, you would have lost your position as spy and probably your life. The law does account for people being under duress."

He was dumbfounded. "Why are you doing this?" he finally asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. He was not used to acts of kindness being directed his way. Normally anyone who did anything for him desired something in return.

She relaxed her demeanor slightly. "Because I believe you. I believe that you were acting under Dumbledore's orders. Don't ask me why, but I just feel it wasn't consistent with what we knew and Dumbledore said about you."

Severus was at a loss for words. Only Dumbledore had trusted him. And surely, after all the lies and manipulation she and her friends had suffered at the hands of Albus Dumbledore, he couldn't believe that she would cling so blindly to anything the old man told them. Albus had known for almost a year that he was going to die from destroying the Horcrux in the ring, yet he had never told Harry, never prepared the boy for losing his mentor and, just like with Severus, left so many other facts unsaid.

"Now, I'll go see Mr. Weasley and be back as soon as I can. Then we can start planning what we want to do. I suppose I'll need to send an owl to Professor McGonagall to set up an appointment, and I'll go talk to Headmaster Brumford and see if the portrait will tell me anything. If not I'll see about arranging for you to come to the castle."

He could tell that there was no stopping her and decided it was best to let her have her fantasy for a little while longer. Once the search proved fruitless, she would see that he would always be an outcast and would lose interest in him.

Hermione arrived at a Ministry abuzz with the news that the last victims of the war had been cured. No one was mentioning Severus's name, which she thought was a shame. The wizarding world should know who saved those people. Severus should not have to hide in the shadows. It had seemed to make sense before she got to know the real Severus Snape that his assistance should be kept quiet, but now she had changed her mind. He deserved to be recognized for his contributions.

When she arrived at Arthur's office, she had to wait for nearly half an hour before she was allowed to see him. The longer she sat, the more impatient she grew. She took a couple of cleansing breaths before entering the office. "Thank you for seeing me."

He took his glasses off. "So obviously you wanted something more than Snape's wand. What's on your mind?"

She knew that what she was about to say would sound awkward. "I know it seems odd, but in working with Severus, well, I've come to believe him that he was operating under Dumbledore's orders."

"Hermione, people have looked, but there has been no proof..." He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I know that, but I think that the wrong people have been looking. It's like when Dumbledore set us on our mission to find the Horcruxes. He gave each of us the tools we would need, but we just didn't know what they were for at that time. But when the time came, working together we figured it out." She watched Mr. Weasley lean forward in interest. "Well, no one has ever let Snape try to prove his innocence. Yes, he had his trial, but it was a very cursory trial."

"Minerva..."

"I know that Minerva asked Dumbledore's portrait, but think about Harry's Snitch. The whole Ministry of Magic couldn't determine what purpose it served. Even Harry couldn't until the time was right. Well, I think the time is right. Severus just saved a large number of people from certain death by brewing the antidote to that poison. This is the best time to prove his innocence, when there are some people who are going to look at his actions and be more likely to believe that he was on the side of the Light the

entire time. At least, they are going to question whether he could work so hard to help the poisoning victims if he was evil enough to murder the Headmaster on Riddle's orders."

Arthur pondered this for several long seconds.

She scooted forward to the edge of her chair. "Please, Mr. Weasley, let us go to Hogwarts and speak with the portrait. All I ask is for one last chance to find the evidence that Dumbledore surely left behind."

"I don't know. Snape back at Hogwarts. If word were to get out..." He trailed off as he pondered the ramifications.

"Then let me go and speak to the portrait first. I might be able to convince him to give me the information we need to exonerate Severus." She refused to give up without making every effort.

He considered her offer for a few moments. "Because it's you vouching for him, I'll allow it, even though it's against my better judgment."

She jumped out of her seat to grab his hands. "You won't regret this. If we can prove his innocence, you'll be lauded as the Minister who makes sure everyone receives fair treatment under the law." She knew that while there were many things they had not known about Dumbledore, she was reasonably sure that if Severus truly had been following his orders, that proof must have been left somewhere.

"I'll contact Headmaster Brumford and let him know to expect your visit. I assume you can wait until tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes. I can go during the day, and if Dumbledore's portrait won't speak to me, I'll bring Severus to Hogwarts over dinner when the students will be in the Great Hall and not likely to be in the upper corridors. Besides, we were working quite late on the potions, and I think some rest would be in order before speaking with Dumbledore's portrait." She knew that the old Headmaster had not liked to give a straight answer to anything.

"St. Mungo's is very eager to get a full report on what you did," he prompted.

"Professor Snape will have to write that. I saw what he did but I can't explain why his antidote was effective. I just don't have his depth of knowledge of Potions. I expect it'll take a couple of days. Thank you again, Mr. Weasley."

She felt much lighter, as though a great weight had been lifted. She knew that they would succeed, that Severus would be proven innocent.

Hermione arrived at Hogwarts the following morning with a little trepidation. She hadn't been back since the war the memories were far too painful. And because she had been there, she knew where to look for the scars in the stone. They were subtle, but they were still there. Too many wonderful people had given their lives that night. She was so lost in the past, that she did not notice Mr. Filch's muttering under his breath about how her visit had inconvenienced him.

With great difficulty, she pushed those thoughts from her mind and entered the castle. She saw that Professor McGonagall was waiting for her in the Entrance Hall. "Professor, it's so good to see you again."

Minerva gave her former star student a welcoming embrace. "It's the least we can do. Albus always told me he had a reason for trusting Severus, and that I should do the same. For a while I thought that trust had been misplaced. It would be very comforting to believe that Albus knew what he was doing. I'm afraid Professor Brumford had business elsewhere today, but he gave me permission to take you to his office."

Hermione found herself glad that she wouldn't have to deal with the new headmaster. She didn't really know him, and she felt that Dumbledore's portrait would be more forthcoming the fewer people who were around. "That might be for the best," she said as they walked towards the headmaster's office.

When they arrived, the room looked nothing like it had under Dumbledore. Gone were the myriad of instruments. The room was very Spartan. There were no personal effects and only one shelf of books. Dumbledore's portrait was hung prominently behind the desk, its occupant seemingly asleep. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione could see the occupants of the other portraits watching her, while trying not to appear as though that was what they were doing.

"I'll leave the two of you," Minerva said as she nodded her head and Dumbledore's portrait.

Once she was alone, Hermione asked, "Professor Dumbledore, may I speak with you?"

"Ah, Miss Granger. What a surprise to see you here," Dumbledore replied, acting as though he was just awakening and had not known she was there.

She'd grown up under this man, and respected him, but she had learned the hard way that trust had been misplaced after the things he had done to Harry, along with Ron, herself, and others. She still harbored a great deal of anger toward him, actually. He had, after all, sent out three teenagers on a wild hunt for Riddle's Horcruxes, so woefully unprepared that it was sheer chance they survived. She wasn't really in the mood to play his little games, even though she knew it might become necessary. "Good morning, Professor. I'm looking for some information. Professor Snape has testified to his role in the war and the orders you gave him, and people have looked for but no one has been able to find any evidence supporting his testimony. Evidence that would clarify things for him and everyone."

"Oh, really!" He tried to sound surprised, tried to look surprised, too, raising his eyebrows and widening his eyes behind his half-moon spectacles.

Hermione could see right through him and knew that demanding he tell her would not be fruitful. After all, his own brother, Aberforth, had told her that Dumbledore had always kept secrets, sometimes telling only half-truths, giving just what he thought was enough information. She had to be more subtle now; she had to outwit him, if that was possible. "Professor, I have talked with Professor Snape, and he told me that he was never able to find any record that he acted on your orders. Of course, he wasn't able to conduct a decent search of the castle when he was headmaster."

"You talked with Severus?" he asked skeptically.

Hermione was reasonably sure this was some sort of test on his part. "Yes. The two of us spent the last couple of days working on an antidote to one of the poisons that was used in the war. I was able to secure his pardon in return for his help, but I believe he deserves more than that. The wizarding world deserves to know the truth so that he can have his life back." When she finished she crossed her arms, daring the portrait to disagree with her.

"So, you believe he's innocent?" Dumbledore asked slyly as he leaned forward in his chair.

She was right; she'd have to be smart, as smart as everyone touted her to be. "I believe that he was acting on your orders for the greater good. I believe you are the most manipulative person I have met. Just look at what you did to Harry, Ron and me. That was incredibly cruel. You could have been more forthright in giving us the information that we needed, especially since you knew that your death was rapidly approaching. You used us just like you used him." She tried to keep the anger out of her voice, but the unending respect she had once had for her old headmaster had faded over the last year.

"I have my reasons for what I did," he replied simply, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands on his lap.

She pointed at him. "You owe it to Snape to reveal the truth about his behavior. You just can't take a person's life away like that, or did you not expect him to survive, just another sacrifice for your *greater good*!" she snapped. At the raising of his eyebrows, she continued, "Oh, yes, your past was dug up. I may not approve of much that Rita Skeeter has done, but she did open our eyes to the truth about you, that all was not as it seems."

"No one's life is as it seems," he said sadly, gazing off into the distance before meeting her eyes. "While there was much that you did not know about me, there is also much that you do not know about Severus. I daresay you would feel about him much the same way you feel about me if you knew the truth."

"He joined with Voldemort because he was young and under pressure. It is a well-established fact that Slytherin was a recruiting ground for his supporters. I don't imagine he had a lot of choice," she replied defensively as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"And I was young when I had my first encounter with Grindelwald. Yet you judge me on what I did when I was young. I righted that wrong. I convinced him that his way was wrong, that he should stop and turn himself in. I atoned for my wrong. Has Severus done that?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, he did. He spied on Voldemort for you all those years, kept tabs on his followers. He kept the students at Hogwarts as safe as he could from the Death Eaters he was forced to hire. He kept Gryffindor's sword safe so that we would be able to use it in the final battle *and* he delivered it to us. He did everything you expected of him and more. Don't let him be an outcast when he should be a hero." She hated how much the last sounded like pleading.

Dumbledore sighed and slowly shook his head. "I can see how little you know of Severus. He does not want fame, and I daresay having everyone leave him alone would be his preference."

"How little you know about him. Over the last few days I have seen how lonely he is, how starved for a legitimate friend he is. He may not want fame, but he most certainly does not want to be ostracized. If you won't help me, I'll figure it out myself. Of course, that's probably what you wanted all along. Heaven forbid you actually help someone rather than give us all these little puzzles to do it ourselves." She turned on her heel and stormed to the door.

Before she could open it, he rose from his painted chair and said, "Wait!"

Impatiently, she turned to face him. "What?" she asked sharply.

"You really do believe in his innocence, don't you?" he asked cautiously as he regained his seat.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't, but I don't see what that has to do with it." She was growing impatient with him. While she hadn't expected him to freely offer proof, she had expected more cooperation than she was getting from him.

"It has everything to do with it. It is the same principle that allowed Harry to call Fawkes to him and to draw the sword out of the Sorting Hat. Faith is an incredibly powerful emotion."

"Yes, yes, just like love," she replied impatiently having heard Harry mention it several times.

"You do not believe in the power of love?"

She sighed, her patience finally at an end. "No, I don't," she snapped. "I'm just tired of how you used all of us like pawns only giving us half the information we would need, seemingly not caring what happened to our lives, whether we lived or died. Well congratulations, you sacrificed Severus, but I'm not going to let you win. One way or the other I will find the proof that he was acting on your orders. I've wasted enough time talking to you." She was determined to just walk out of the office, even though she was incredibly disappointed that a man she had so highly respected had been so cavalier with people's lives.

"You want your proof?" he called out to her as she placed her hand on the doorknob.

She almost didn't stop, thinking this was just going to be one more of his games. "What else do I have to do before you let me have it?" she asked cautiously without turning around.

"Nothing. Well, that is assuming that my possessions can still be found. Severus kept them safe here, but I notice that his successor had them all removed. I think that Severus suspected that one of them might contain the information he needed."

She had heard about the myriad of magical instruments that Dumbledore kept in his office, but she had never really looked at any of them. "Which one do I have to locate?" she asked as she turned to look him the eyes, trying not to sound too excited that she was going to succeed after all this was Dumbledore she was dealing with.

"You must find the keepings box," he said simply with his hands clasped on his lap.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

Hermione has talked to Dumbledore's portrait, but the answer is not as clear as she had hoped.

Chapter 4

"A keepings box?" Hermione asked, opened mouth in stunned disbelief. It was nothing she had ever read about.

He waved his hand nonchalantly, ignoring her disbelief. "Severus should know what it is if you are not familiar with them. Perhaps Minerva knows what happened to my possessions, or you may have to ask Bernard."

"And what do I have to do with it when I find it?" she asked cautiously, recalling that opening the Snitch was not straightforward.

"Nothing," he said smugly, settling back into his painted chair. "You have demonstrated what is necessary to open it and get the proof that you seek. Good luck, Miss Granger."

Feeling much better and a bit surprised that she had gotten a seemingly straight answer out of the old man, she headed back down to Minerva's office.

"Did you get your answer?" Minerva asked optimistically.

Hermione paced as her mind reeled, trying to make sense of the conversation with the old headmaster. "It took some doing, but after a while, yes. Do you know what happened to his possessions after the office was emptied?"

Minerva thought for a moment. "I'm afraid that I don't. One of the house-elves may know. Eppy!" Minerva called out.

In a flash, a house-elf in a Hogwarts' tea towel appeared before them. "Yes, Professor? What can Eppy be doing of service?"

"Do you know what became of Professor Dumbledore's personal effects?" Minerva asked.

The elf dipped her ears. "No, Professor, but Eppy will ask the others."

In a matter of minutes a different house-elf popped into Minerva's office. "Kab is knowing where Professor Dumbledore's things went. This way, Professor," the elf said as he moved towards the door.

"You will show Miss Granger, and she will be allowed to remove whatever she needs," Minerva instructed.

"Yes, Professor. Come, come, Miss. This way. Kab will show," the elf gestured for Hermione to follow him.

He led her through parts of the castle she had never seen, which given the amount of exploring she had done with Ron and Harry was saying something. After fifteen minutes of walking, he pulled open a heavy wooden door.

Behind it was a cramped store room lined with shelves. At least everything was stored neatly, she thought as she started perusing the possessions of the old headmaster. Of course, she wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for, so that complicated matters. Not to mention it appeared as though some objects had been down here for decades. She got the impression this storeroom had more than just Dumbledore's old possessions.

Kab watched her from the door. "If Miss knows what Miss is looking for Kab can find it," he offered helpfully.

As she looked at the shelves full of various magical instruments and boxes she was quickly becoming overwhelmed. "I don't know exactly what I'm looking for, but thank you for showing me this room." As she looked around, she knew that she had to get Severus. After all, the portrait had indicated that he would know what the keepings box looked like.

It took her a while to find her way back to Minerva's office, and she took several wrong turns along the way.

"Did you find it?" Minerva asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No. There is far too much stuff down there for me to determine what exactly I need. He said that Severus would know what it is, so I'll have to return with him." She knew that the letter from the Ministry had said there would be a possibility that Severus would have to return to Hogwarts and that Minerva seemed to want to believe in his innocence. "That area is well away from where any students should be," Hermione offered.

Minerva raised an eyebrow, knowing full well there were always those students who went exactly where they were not supposed to be. "I'll do what I can to seal off the area, but I will ask that the two of you be as discreet as possible. He is not exonerated yet, and if word were to leak out that he had been here..." She trailed off knowing that Hermione understood the ramifications.

Hermione nodded. "I know. We should easily be able to slip in and out of the castle without being seen. Something tells me Severus knows a lot more about the castle than most of the rest of us."

"Indeed," Minerva remarked. "As you will be coming during dinner, I don't expect to see either of you, and if the headmaster returns, I will inform him of your presence. If you will require more time, please let me know. I'll have the Gamekeeper let you through the gates."

"I will." Hermione knew that Minerva was thinking what she was: that Dumbledore had had so many possessions they might not be able to go through everything in one evening.

Severus was pacing restlessly. He did not have a lot of faith in Hermione's plan. After all, he had been left to rot in Azkaban by that scheming, old tyrant. If the old man's portrait wouldn't help him for his trial, why should it help him now? Yes, he had his freedom and his wand, but what was that without a reputation?

He knew that he should be working on the report for St. Mungo's on the poison and antidote, but he could not force his mind to concentrate. Especially after having read the *Daily Prophet*. There had naturally been an article about the final victims of the war being healed. Hermione and the healers were mentioned, but he was not specifically named at least not on the first page. Buried at the end of the article on page seventeen, it was mentioned he had rendered assistance. 'Rendered assistance! Bloody fools! Everyone would have died without my knowledge,' he seethed. It also mentioned that he was being pardoned for his services rendered. He knew it was not likely most people would make it that far in the article.

If only they knew the full extent of what he did to help Potter bring down the Dark Lord. Oh, they did know, but they wanted to cover it up, chose to believe he was weaving a web of lies to save his own skin. After all, they needed some Death Eaters to throw in prison, and the old man wasn't there to vouch for him this time. Since he had no family and no social standing, he was the perfect scapegoat to let rot in prison.

Checking the clock, he saw that it was nearly noon and that he should eat something, but he was not hungry.

"It's foolish to get your hopes up," he chided as he nervously paced.

When the front door opened, he stopped and watched Hermione expectantly. "Well?"

She entered the room and stood near the fireplace. "I spoke with the portrait, and he told me that what I need is in a keepings box, but well, I don't know what that is. He said that you would. We can go to Hogwarts this evening and start searching his possessions."

"A keepings box?" Severus asked skeptically. "That devious old man," he muttered.

"What is a keepings box?" she asked as he resumed his pacing.

"It could be anything," Severus replied, waving his hands in exasperation. Even now the old man was playing his games with him. He saw the look of puzzlement on Hermione's face. "It's a magically sealed object that will open when the time is right."

"Oh! So it's like Harry's Snitch. It would only open when he was facing Voldemort," she said excitedly.

He did not really know what she was talking about. "You have seen his possessions?" he asked as he stopped in front of her.

"I did. They are stored in a remote part of the castle. I was never really in his office, so I wouldn't know if everything was there."

He nodded. That was something; they were all in the same place. He resumed pacing, hands clasped behind his back as he racked his brain trying to remember if there was anything in the office that appeared to have some sort of secret compartment or that would not open when he examined it. He thought about trying to get more information from the portrait. "What *exactly* did he say about the box?" he asked as he watched her expectantly.

Hermione paused a moment, recalling the encounter. "He said that I had to find the keepings box and that you would know what it was if I didn't, which I don't. He also said that I already demonstrated what is necessary to open it, whatever that means."

Severus arched an eyebrow at her.

She raised her hands in exasperation. "You knew him better than I did."

Severus started pacing again. She'd already demonstrated what is necessary to open it. He had no idea what that meant either. "Did you discuss anything else with him?"

"It was all about you and trying to find out if there is evidence to prove that you were completely faithful to him. You know what it's like trying to get a straight answer from him. He brought up Fawkes and the sorting hat and the sword of Gryffindor."

"In what context?" he interrupted.

She took a deep breath as she watched Severus pacing back and forth. "He was talking about the importance of faith. That it was Harry's faith that allowed him to call Fawkes while in the Chamber of Secrets."

Faith. Severus assumed that must mean that she had demonstrated the proper amount of faith in his innocence. "Anything else?" He knew that every word the old man spoke could have hidden meaning.

"No, that's pretty much it."

Now all they had to do was wait until they could go to the castle and begin their search. He should be used to waiting by now. His entire life had been full of waiting, but seeing that he was so close to being free, he found it exceedingly difficult.

After lunch, Hermione had decided to do some reading before they went to Hogwarts. Unfortunately, Severus had decided to continue pacing. "Must you?" Hermione asked as she was trying to focus on a book and found his constant movement distracting.

He shot her a glare that would have made her wilt in times past, but she merely met his gaze for a few seconds before returning her attention to her book. He flopped into the other chair and thought about trying to read, but he knew that he would never be able to focus. He was still mentally cataloguing every obscure magical artifact that had festooned the old man's, and later his, office. Nervously he started tapping his foot without realizing it.

"Severus!" Hermione said sharply.

He glared at her again. "I am mere hours from having the opportunity to prove that everything I have been trying to tell the Ministry since the end of the war is the truth, and you ask me to sit still?" he asked in exasperation.

She sighed and put down her book. There were several long seconds before she spoke. "I can understand you're nervous about this..."

"I'm not nervous!" he interrupted. Admittedly he was a tad nervous that this keepings box was nowhere to be found, that something had happened to it. She gave him a look that said she didn't believe him. He crossed his arms and hunched back into his chair. "Fine. I'm nervous. Happy?"

She did not look happy. "The house-elf I spoke to did not indicate that any of Dumbledore's possessions weren't stored away. He was in fact quite eager to help me find whatever it was I was looking for, but since I had no idea what it was, he wasn't going to be of any help."

They stared at each other in silence. She finally broke the uneasy quiet. "Look, let's just get out of here, go for a walk somewhere and then have an early dinner before going to Hogwarts."

He most certainly did not feel like eating and going for a walk had never been one of his favorite activities, but anything was better than being cooped up here, so he gestured for her to lead the way.

He was a bit taken aback when she suggested Hogsmeade, but he knew that it would be less crowded there than in Diagon Alley or one of the other wizarding enclaves, and he was most definitely not dressed properly to be seen by Muggles.

They walked in silence in the countryside by the village, his gaze unconsciously drifting up to the castle and the secrets held within. If there was one thing, Hogwarts had no shortage of secrets.

"Severus, we should head into the village to get something to eat," Hermione said, interrupting his thoughts.

"I'm not hungry," he replied shortly.

"You may not be, but I am."

He looked at the determination in her face and knew that she would not let him go up to the castle until they had dined. He resigned himself to following her direction at least until this ordeal was ended and he was exonerated. After all, she was the one who had access to the Minister.

Even though he did not order anything to eat, she took the liberty of ordering him a sandwich and making him eat it. He hated that he was once again someone's pawn, though he knew this was different. Still, he longed to once again be his own man. He ate it as quickly as he could because he knew that the other patrons were whispering about him. Something told him that even once proof was found, there would always be whispering. He would forever be the man who killed Dumbledore. It would never matter that the old man would have died within the hour.

When they left, Hermione reprimanded, "If you wouldn't act like a child, you wouldn't draw so much attention."

He snapped back, "If you would let me lead my own life and stop trying to mother me..."

She interrupted, "I'm not mothering you. You refuse to look out for yourself, so someone has to do it. Since the list of people who cares for you is exactly one, that job falls to me. I don't know about you, but I don't perform at my best when on empty stomach. For all I know we are going to be searching that room all night."

"In case you have forgotten, the castle is staffed with house-elves eager to serve. When hunger strikes, it would be quite simple to ask one of them to bring something to eat," he replied defensively, trying to hide his surprise at her admitting she cared for him.

"Oh, right," she replied as though that thought had never occurred to her, and her cheeks flushed. "I never thought of that. I mean as students you just don't go around calling for the house-elves. I know I didn't even know about them the first couple of years."

He couldn't help the smug grin that spread on his lips.

"What's that for?" she asked suspiciously when she saw it.

"I suppose that I still enjoy bringing a know-it-all down a peg or two," he replied playfully.

Hermione considered the enigma that was Severus as they walked up to the castle. There was much that she did not know about him. She had not expected him to be courteous to her as he worked, let alone solicit her assistance. There were also the small acts of kindness such as preparing her breakfast. She tried to reason that his behavior was calculated to gain her sympathy and support, that he was just being a scheming Slytherin, but she was not entirely sure. His last comment about bringing her down a peg had not been malicious in the least.

"Why were you so hard on me in school?" she asked cautiously.

Her question caught him off guard, and he stopped dead in his tracks for a few seconds. She turned to watch him.

"You are incredibly bright with a great deal of book knowledge, but that is never enough. You needed to learn something of the world."

"So you bullied me? Do you think that was the first time I was bullied? I am Muggle-born and never fit in. Surely *you* would understand that," she snapped back.

"I do understand it," he replied sympathetically, "and that's why I behaved how I did towards you. I did not want you alone with your books." He started to lift his hand, as though reaching for her, but then thought better of it and let his hand fall back to his side before resuming their walk, leaving her to follow. "And on that subject, why did you let Weasley and Potter copy your work? Were you that starved for friendship that you would give away your best asset for nothing?"

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. "You think friendship is nothing? Without that friendship where would we be? Would Harry have been able to defeat Voldemort on his own? Love is an emotion you could never understand," she retorted.

He turned on her and stopped her in her tracks by placing his hand on her shoulder. "I understand more about love than you ever will," he said coolly.

She crossed her arms, waiting to hear more.

Severus turned to continue the walk to the castle gates. When he realized that she was not following he turned and asked impatiently, "Are you coming?"

She remained rooted on the spot. "No. I think you owe me an explanation." She had been handed this golden opportunity to find out more about Severus Snape, and she intended to take it.

"I owe you nothing," he retorted sharply, standing a few feet away from her, obviously impatient to be going.

She stood her ground stubbornly, unmoving until he answered her. "I think that you do, and I think you know why you do."

He took three steps towards her so that there was very little space between them, glaring at her from his slight height advantage. "What I tell you is for your ears alone. You are *never* to speak to anyone, especially Potter or Weasley, about this. Is that understood?"

While she did not think he was in a place to bargain, her curiosity had gotten the better of her. "Alright. This is between the two of us."

He seemed to shrink into himself and didn't look directly at her. "As you are aware, I am half-blood. My Muggle father was a despicable man with no ambition. He despised what my mother was and ordered her to sever ties with the wizarding world if she expected any assistance raising me." He looked away toward one of the houses or the trees beyond it. "It was a horrible childhood of poverty." His gaze shifted toward the castle in the distance. "Being able to come to Hogwarts was the most amazing thing that had happened in my life at least until James Potter and his gang decided bullying me would become their primary form of entertainment. I was poor, bookish, friendless and Slytherin, presumably the only reasons they needed to torment me."

He finally looked at her, but there was something in his eyes, a deep hurt. "There was one person who showed me kindness through all that. Lily. She would defend me, study with me. She was my friend." His eyes turned downcast. "For me that friendship turned to love, though I dared not let her know that for fear of losing her friendship. I knew that someone like her would never love someone like me." He pulled out his wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A silver doe shot forth from his wand. "It was her Patronus as well," he said quietly.

Hermione stared at him in utter disbelief. "So Harry... Turning to Dumbledore..."

"It was all for Lily. When I learned that the Dark Lord was going to kill her son, I knew I could not let that happen." He watched as the Patronus returned to him. "While she had chosen life with another, I never stopped loving her," he said as the Patronus faded. He finally turned away from her.

"That's why you were so tough on Harry, to push him, to prepare him, to protect him?" She was still trying to assimilate this new depth she had discovered to her former professor.

"In part. It also pained me to see Lily's eyes on the face of someone who so closely resembled James Potter," he said with emotion she couldn't differentiate, a loathing, yet sad and remorseful. "In the end, he was prepared, so does it really matter what my motivation was."

She placed her hand on his shoulder. "Without you, we never would have succeeded. I know that we'll find the proof we need and the wizarding world will know how instrumental you were," she said softly.

He turned and looked into her eyes, as though trying to determine what she was thinking. Recalling that he had been the one to teach Harry Occlumency and that he knew Legilimency, she looked away.

Severus took hold of her chin and forced her to look at him. "I would never look into your mind without permission," he said quietly and then released her chin.

This time she did not look away, but stared into his dark eyes with a newfound understanding of the man behind them. After a silence that seemed to stretch to eternity, she said, "I think we should get up to the castle."

After they had been walking a short way, he said, "You never did answer my question: Why did you let Potter and Weasley copy your work?"

"They didn't normally copy my work. I just... helped them out a bit," she replied sheepishly. She had tried to discourage out and out copying, but there had been times when events had led her to do so.

"A bit?" he asked arching an eyebrow.

"Well, they still had to pass exams in the end, didn't they?" she replied defensively. "And they did pass."

"Indeed they did, but why help them?" Now that he had bared his soul to her, he wanted to learn more about her.

She gave him a quick glance. "I think you know why. But there was more to our friendship than me helping them academically. They're the family I never had."

By now they were approaching the gates and greeted the new gamekeeper with a nod as he let them through the gates and escorted them up to the castle. They finished their walk to the castle in silence, neither one of them sure what to say after the evening's revelations, especially not with someone possibly listening to their conversation. When they entered, they could hear everyone in the Great Hall.

"This way," she said as she led him into the depths of Hogwarts to the storage room where Dumbledore's effects were.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 8

Severus and Hermione search for the keepings box and a way to prove that he was following Dumbledore's orders.

Chapter 5

Severus looked upon the shelves of familiar instruments and unfamiliar. Even before taking over as Headmaster, he had spent hours studying some of them. He and the old headmaster had shared tea on frequent occasions. There were times when Severus had resented that, thinking that the old man didn't quite trust him, but there were other times where it seemed as though he was being treated as a favored grandson.

Well, he had not been that favored if the old man had not bothered to leave evidence of their agreement where it could be found.

"Where do we start?" Hermione asked, facing a wall of shelves, stacked full of items and devices.

"You start on that shelf and I'll start on this one," he said, first pointing to the shelves in front of her, then to the ones behind her. "Each device will need to be inspected for hidden compartments. As it seems that there is more than just Albus' things stored here, let me know when you have finished." He wished he had better advice to offer, but Hermione's comparison to the Snitch given to Potter was accurate. Hopefully the compartment would reveal itself since it the portrait had indicated it was the proper time.

He lost track of time as he carefully examined item after item, then moved onto the next row of shelves. Realizing it had been some time since Hermione had asked him a question, he decided to look for her. He found her slumped in a corner, fast asleep. Rather than wake her, he took off his outer robe and covered her with it.

Hours later he heard her stirring.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. What time is it?" she asked as she then stretched then yawned.

He had not been keeping track of the time and checked his watch. "Quarter after four."

"I'm sorry I fell asleep. Is there anything I can help with?" she asked sheepishly.

He pointed at the shelf where he was standing. "These are the last few items I have not examined."

"No sign of anything?" she asked, the disappointment clear in her voice. "He said that we would find what we needed in the keepings box."

Severus turned to her. "Think back. What exactly did he say?" He knew that she had told him once, but perhaps she could remember something she hadn't mentioned the first time.

"He told me that if I wanted proof, it was in the keepings box and that you would know what that was." She paused a moment, trying to recall her conversation. "I then asked him what I needed to do with it and he told me nothing, that I had already demonstrated what is necessary to open it."

He frowned. It was not at all illuminating. It only took them a few minutes to examine the remaining items.

"Clearly it is not here," Severus remarked, not bothering to hide his disappointment. He knew he should not have gotten his hopes up.

"It has to be somewhere," Hermione remarked. Her face lit up as she got an idea. "Kab," she said softly.

Severus arched his eyebrow.

"Kab!" she called out.

A house-elf popped into the room. "Yes, Miss? How may Kab be of service?" he asked obsequiously.

"Is this all of Professor Dumbledore's belonging?" she asked.

"Other than the professor's clothes and those items he willed, yes, Miss."

"The will! Why didn't I think of it sooner? He knew that we would need help in the form of various magical artifacts, and he willed those to us. Surely he would have willed the keepings box to someone rather than risk it being thrown out," she said excitedly.

Severus crossed his arms and snorted. "You have much more faith in him than I do. Who might he have willed something like that to? It clearly was not me."

She was pacing excitedly now as her mind raced ahead. "I need to get to the Ministry. Surely his will has been filed with Magical Probate, and we can figure out where it might have gone."

He placed his hands on her shoulders to get her attention. "Seeing as it's half past four in the morning, I think that our best option would be to return to the house and get at least a few hours rest. As I am no longer at Azkaban, and my life is not in imminent danger, there is no reason anything has to be done this minute. It has been a year since his passing, and the odds of someone deciding this morning to throw out whatever it was they had been left are incredibly remote."

She blushed. "Right. Sorry. Sometimes I get a little carried away."

He arched his eyebrow at her and let a small grin show on his lips. "A little?"

By the time they made it to the castle gates, Severus was feeling quite exhausted. After being in Azkaban for months and then spending nearly two straight days working on the antidote, one night of sleep had not been enough to restore his strength. It pained him to ask, but he was reasonably sure he would Splinch if he tried to Apparate. "Hermione, do you think you could..." He offered her his arm, finding it difficult to actually ask for help.

She looked at him imploringly, trying to figure out what he was asking.

He sighed, knowing she had won this round. "I'm quite exhausted after a night of searching and would rather not walk to Hogsmeade for the Floo."

"And?" she prompted.

"Could you Apparate us back?" he finally asked.

She did nothing more than raise her eyebrows.

"Please?" he finally added.

"That wasn't so difficult, was it?" she asked playfully as she took hold of his arm and Apparated them back to the safe house.

When they arrived she did not immediately let go of his arm, and he found himself enjoying her touch. He looked into her eyes for several seconds, trying to gauge her feelings. Finally he placed his hand over hers and said, "Thank you."

She flushed at his words, looked away and finally released his arm. "You're welcome." There was an awkward silence that followed until she added, "So, I'll get a few hours of sleep and then head to the Ministry to see what I can learn."

Hermione slept fitfully, her mind occupied with not just thoughts of finding proof of Severus' loyalty, but how he had behaved towards her. She couldn't believe she'd been flirting with him, but she had been, hadn't she? Was it so bad to flirt with him? She had always admired his intellect and had longed to impress him when she was a student. Of course she was no longer his student, and she never would have dared speak so lightly toward him, let alone flirt with him then. But they were both adults now who seemed to have a mutual attraction.

Or did he? Was she reading him correctly? Or like she'd initially thought, was he simply trying to develop a friendship with her?

She tried to push thoughts of Severus from her mind, but to no avail. She kept reliving the pleasant and playful moments of the last few days in her mind's eye. She gave up trying to sleep shortly before nine. She thought of waking Severus before she left, but she knew that his presence at the Ministry would be a distraction and that she should not disturb his sleep. He had been so incredibly exhausted last night, and she knew he needed to rest. Instead she wrote a note and placed a warming charm on his breakfast plate.

When she arrived at the Ministry there was the usual morning hustle and bustle. As a visitor she had to wait in line to have her wand weighed and receive her visitor's badge. This was the part she hated most because people kept coming up to her and congratulating her for her work with the antidote. She knew there would be some, but she was surprised by how many there were. She tried to tell them that she had merely helped and that Severus had done the bulk of the work, but no one seemed to be listening. Of course they wouldn't, it was easier to maintain the status quo that he was a Death Eater and belonged in Azkaban.

Finally she was able to take the lift to Magical Probate, which was in a fairly deserted section of the Ministry.

She stepped up to the desk manned by an elderly wizard. "I'd like to see Albus Dumbledore's will, please," she asked as pleasantly as possible.

He furrowed his brow a few seconds. "Dumbledore... Dumbledore... Ah, yes. That will was read and executed last year."

Hermione tried to remain calm. Getting frustrated with the old wizard would serve no purpose. "Yes, I was one of the beneficiaries, and I was never able to see a copy of the will. Now that everything has calmed down, I had hoped to take a look at it."

After considering her a few moments, he said, "That's very unusual, very unusual. I don't know."

"Please, sir, there might have been a message he left in there for a friend of mine. It's very important."

"There's protocol to be followed, forms, it's just not done," he muttered.

She sighed. This wasn't something she normally liked doing, but at this point she would try anything that would help. "I don't know if you know who I am..." she prompted, hoping her status as war heroine might grant her this special dispensation a little more easily.

He adjusted his glasses and considered her for a few seconds. "Oh, yes, you're that Granger girl from the war. Good job there."

"Thank you. Do you think you could see fit to let me take a look at Dumbledore's will? I'll read it here."

"Oh, no. I'm sorry. Procedures must be followed, paperwork filled out. It just isn't done. Once a will is read, that's it," he said rather definitively as he shuffled the papers on his desk.

She took a deep breath. "Could I have the forms?" she asked as patiently as she could.

He looked at her as though no one had ever asked him that question. Finally he rose from his seat and muttered about forms and 'not done' while he dug through a dusty filing cabinet. After several minutes he returned with a stack of forms. "These need to be filled out, notarized, and then they'll need to be verified." He tapped his lips thoughtfully. "It'll take about two weeks."

"Two weeks?" she asked in shock. This was completely unbelievable. Rather than get into an argument with the old wizard, she decided her best course of action was to get help from Arthur. She really hated bothering him, but this was very important to her, and she did not want to wait two weeks for an answer. She just knew that Severus had to have been acting on Dumbledore's orders the entire time and she would do whatever it took to prove it.

When she arrived at the Minister's office, she was informed that he was in meetings outside the Ministry this morning and that the secretary did not know exactly when he would be returning. She decided to wait and found herself wishing she had brought a book since she had already read the old issues of *Witch Weekly* sitting in the reception area.

When Severus woke, he was surprised by how light it was outside, realizing it must already be midday. He dragged himself out of bed to see what Hermione was doing. He saw the plate and note on the table, but no sign of her. He reasoned that she must have gone to the Ministry without him. He felt a small pang of disappointment that she had let him sleep.

He sat to eat and read the note. Checking the clock on the wall, he saw that it was nearly noon and that she had been gone since nine that morning. He wondered what could be taking her so long to read Dumbledore's will. He knew the old man liked to be wordy and circumspect, but it should not have taken nearly three hours.

Once finished with his meal, he decided he might as well try to work on the report for St. Mungo's. Since he had not noticed any glaring absence of possessions in the store room, he was inclined to believe the supposed proof of his innocence in a keepings box was one last joke the old man was playing on him. At least he had his wand returned. He could always go to the Continent or there was the option of finding employment through some of the less savory contacts he had, but it would probably be wiser to leave Britain entirely for at least a few years.

It took him until nearly three o'clock to finish the report, and Hermione still had not returned. He was sitting in one of the armchairs attempting to read, but not having much success as he kept checking the clock. Finally he heard the door open at a little after three. She held a roll of parchment triumphantly in her hand. He noticed that she looked quite harried.

"Problems?" he asked as he put his book down.

She moved next over to the table. "Like you would not believe. Trying to get anything done at the Ministry... Doesn't matter. I was able to read the original and make a copy of it. I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary on the original to suggest there was any magically hidden text, though if there was, I'm sure the Ministry would have discovered it." She placed it on the table and rolled it out. "There really wasn't much to it. Other than leaving his money to charity, he left most of his possessions to his brother, other than the ones he gave us."

Severus joined her at the table and frowned as he read the document. He had not expected much, but he thought that there should have been something else. "If he left his possessions to his brother, why were they at the castle?"

She glanced at him across the table. "I asked, and the probate officer told me that Aberforth didn't want them and said to keep them at the castle. I'm guessing the house-elves took him at his word and just stored the stuff. I guess we're back at square one." Her shoulders slumped.

"Unsurprisingly," replied Snape dryly as he leaned back in his chair. Well, at least he had some semblance of a plan for what to do with his life now.

"Maybe if we talk to the portrait again? I can talk to Mr. Weasley about getting you to see the portrait... Oh, why didn't I think of it? We don't need to go to Hogwarts. He has a portrait at the Ministry!" she said excitedly.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "You do realize he likely spends most of his time at Hogwarts, and even if he were to visit his Ministry portrait, something tells me it's not located in a quiet corner."

She gave him a sly grin. "Honestly, Severus, I thought you would know that he could travel within the other portraits at the Ministry. I'll send owls to Minerva and to Arthur and see if we can arrange a secluded meeting."

It pleased him to see her verbally sparring with him. "Of course. It must have slipped my mind," he said offhandedly. As she dug out parchment and quill from the desk, he said, "I was able to finish the report for St. Mungo's. I thought that you might like to review it and see if there was anything you wanted to add."

"Really?" she asked in utter surprise as she turned from her rummaging to look at him.

He rose from his chair and took a few steps towards the desk. "We did work together on this."

"I don't know that it was really together. I just followed your instructions," she replied bashfully, looking away from his dark eyes.

He took another step closer. "Without your meticulous notes, I would never have been able to postulate the theories that led to the antidote," he said softly, taking one last step to close the distance between them.

She was forced to look up into his eyes and found herself at an utter loss for words. "I should write those letters," she said lamely.

"Do I frighten you?" he asked gently.

"No," she replied even though he could see her trembling.

He placed his hand gently on her cheek. "Then why are you shaking?" he asked quietly before letting his lips brush her other cheek.

"Severus, please," she whispered as she closed her eyes.

"Please, what?" he asked before softly kissing her lips. Gently he probed her lips with his tongue to see if she would deepen the kiss. She did. Her lips were soft and velvety. He could feel her put her hand on his arm, but she did not try to pull him away.

When they broke the kiss, she was once again looking into his eyes. "I don't think... This is moving a little too fast for me," she said softly as she took a step backwards, bumping against the desk chair.

He took a step back and watched her carefully, letting her make the next move.

"This is all a bit confusing. Everything has changed so quickly over the last few days, and we still don't know what your status is." There was another long silence. Finally she said, "Are you going to say anything?"

"I was waiting for you to finish thinking," he said, watching the myriad of emotions flitting across her face.

"And what were you thinking?" she asked.

"I was thinking that you are a lovely and talented witch who deserves to be with someone who is your equal. I know of your feelings for Weasley, but I doubt you would ever be truly happy with him." He had lost Lily because he had not told her how he felt. He had no idea where things stood between her and Weasley, he'd not been allowed papers in Azkaban, but if he had even a remote chance of anything with this woman, he did not want to lose Hermione for the same reason.

She looked shocked by his words and clumsily sat in the desk chair. "And you think you might be that equal?" she asked quietly. "We hardly know each other."

He looked longingly at her, as though he finally knew what he wanted in life. "I know more about you than you imagine, but I am willing to take the time to get to know you better if you are willing to do the same."

She eyed him appraisingly for quite some time. "I think that might be a good idea, but after we clear your name."

He got down on his knee so that he could look into her eyes. "I think that we can do both at the same time."

"I suppose so, but I really do need to get those letters written. The sooner we clear your name, the better." She turned the chair towards the desk, once again searching for parchment.

"And if my name is not cleared?" he asked pointedly. It was better they face this possibility sooner rather than later.

She turned to face him, quill in her hand. "I believe you. That's all that's important."

He reached his hand out and brushed her cheek. "Your reputation will not likely be enough to protect you from my past as the wizarding world sees it. Are you prepared to be ostracized?"

"Severus, I was an outcast until I found Harry and Ron," she gently took hold of his hand, pulling it away from her cheek. "And I would have," she swallowed and glanced away from him, "you, if it gets to that point," her gaze met his again. "I can handle it."

He rose to his feet and stepped back slightly to allow her some space. He would take her at her word, though he knew there was a difference between being bullied because you were the brainy kid and being shunned because people thought you a despicable human being. "Then I should let you write those letters and perhaps I can prepare dinner?" There was time, he had time.

"You cook?" she asked skeptically.

"I did not spend my summers at Hogwarts," he said with a smirk. "Cooking is quite a useful skill."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

Hermione and Severus question Dumbledore's portrait in the hopes of learning more about where evidence to fully exonerate Severus would be.

Chapter 6

Over dinner, Hermione considered that she really did not know Severus all that well. She had most definitely not expected him to kiss her. Of course how well had she really known any of her teachers? She had tried probing for information about his past, but he really didn't add much more than what he had told her while they had walked up to the castle. Not that she could blame him. If his time at Hogwarts had been as lonely and miserable as he indicated, she wouldn't want to dwell on it either.

She figured that asking him about what had drawn him to Voldemort's service was a bit too personal, so she opted for trying to learn something about his recent past, such as his likes and dislikes, hobbies and personal details of that ilk.

He had been slightly more forthcoming on that front, telling her that he liked classical music and jazz, both Muggle and wizarding varieties and as she had suspected, that he was a voracious reader. They then spent the rest of the evening debating the finer points of several authors. While the both enjoyed reading, they clearly had separate preferences and it led to a rather lively debate.

Their debate was interrupted by an owl tapping at the window. As Severus was closer to the window, he let the bird in and retrieved the letter. "We are to report to the Ministry in one hour."

She could see the despondency in his posture. Crossing the room she wrapped her arms around his arm and leaned against his shoulder. "We'll get some answers. I just know it."

"I find your optimism misplaced. There was ample opportunity for him to look out for me. I was nothing but a meaningless pawn to him, waiting to be sacrificed, and he's merely playing a cruel game with you."

He tried to pull away, but she held tight. "I don't think so. I think he was ready to let go of this secret."

"Then all he would have to do is say something," Severus snapped. "If he was so interested in me not being unfairly punished, we would not have to play his little games. Even if I had not been subject to the Unbreakable Vow, I believe he still would have had me kill him to ensure my place with the Death Eaters. He was that sort of man. He would have told me that his death would have meaning then rather than him just wasting away from the Dark Magic that could not be purged. He pretends to care, but I doubt that he actually does." He finally shook his arm away from hers and went to brood by the other window.

She decided to let him brood. One thing that she was learning was that she liked to be optimistic about things while he took the more pessimistic outlook. Given everything he had been through in his life, she could understand his reluctance to hope for anything good to happen to him. Though she hoped that would soon change.

Eventually he moved away from the window and sat in the chair, arms crossed, letting her know that he was in no mood for conversation.

Once it was time to leave, she let him know.

The two of them proceeded to the nearly deserted Ministry. The watch wizard only arched an eyebrow curiously upon learning that Severus Snape was one of his afterhour's visitors, but let them pass. Alastor Gumbail was waiting for them.

"Alright. Let's get this over with," he said shortly. He led them to a secluded office. "If he follows instructions, Dumbledore should be here soon. Of course, given the fact he didn't tell us anything useful last time, I wouldn't hold my breath that he'll be here."

"Are you going to stay?" Hermione asked.

"Don't you think there ought to be a witness in case he says something useful?" Gumbail asked.

Hermione and Severus shared a glance. "We've found that Dumbledore tends to be rather circumspect, more so when there are others around. If you would wait outside, we'll let you know if there's anything important you want to witness."

Gumbail considered the two of them momentarily. "It's not my life," he said as he shrugged his shoulders before heading outside.

As soon as the door closed, a voice spoke from the picture frame. "Ah, good, we are alone. Hermione, good to see you again. And you, too, Severus."

Severus snorted and crossed his arms.

She ignored his petulant behavior. "Professor, we searched through everything in the storeroom and found no sign of the keepings box. If perhaps you could give us a little more information about it?" she prompted.

He tapped his lips thoughtfully. "Most unfortunate. I had hoped the two of you would be able to find it."

Severus could no longer contain himself. "Why must we find anything? All that would be required would be for you to testify on my behalf!" Severus snapped.

"Ah, my boy, but it doesn't work that way," he said sadly. "You see, I am not in full possession of all the memories from when I was living. I am the essence that was Dumbledore and possess some memories, but there are great holes. Alas, I am unable to provide concrete evidence that all you did was in service to the Order."

Severus looked as though he was going to blast the portrait to bits.

"And one of those holes is what exactly became of the keepings box?" asked Hermione, doing her best to ignore Severus' emotional outburst.

"Indeed it is, my child. I wish that I could be more specific, but I cannot," he replied sadly.

"I told you this would be worthless," Severus muttered as he went to sulk in the corner.

"You told me that faith would be important. I've demonstrated my faith in Severus, and we searched through all your possessions to no avail," she said to the portrait.

"I also told you that love would be important," he added.

Severus' gaze shot to the portrait, and he locked eyes with his former master as he moved back in front of the portrait. "What about love?"

"I merely mentioned that it was a powerful emotion and that there is a great deal of magic associated with it," Albus said simply with a wave of his hand.

Severus glanced at Hermione who shrugged her shoulders apologetically. "I think he mentioned it in passing, but he said quite a bit when I last spoke to him."

"Clearly there is something more if you mentioned it. Did you decide to leave me to fester in Azkaban until by some very unlikely chance I would find love? That is a very cruel joke indeed if that is the case."

"I never said that love would have anything to do with finding the keepings box," Albus said cryptically.

Severus glared one last time at the portrait and started pacing restlessly. He had detested the old man's riddles in life, and his opinion of them had not changed with the man's passing.

Hermione stood in front of Severus to stop him. "Severus, I need your help in this. Clearly I didn't get the right information last time."

Albus smiled as he watched the two of them interact.

"You can wipe that smarmy grin off your face this instant," Severus said pointedly.

Albus tried to stop smiling. "Of course. I'm just pleased to see that you have found someone who can tolerate you."

Hermione started thinking aloud, ignoring the headmaster. "We searched through all the possessions. Kab said that everything other than your clothes and anything that was willed was there. I checked your will, and other than what you left Harry, Ron and me, everything else material you left to your brother. Probate told me that he didn't want any of it and to keep it at the castle. So that leaves us where we started searching for a keepings box that we have no idea what it looks like."

Severus had been listening to her words. "Would Aberforth have kept anything?" When no one answered, he snapped, "Well, would he? The elf said that everything was there except what was willed. What if Aberforth kept something?"

Albus considered them for a few moments. "There were a handful of possessions that belonged to members of the family, my mother and sister. He might have kept some of those. Though he might not have cared enough to check."

"It makes sense that you would have used something with some sentimental value as the keepings box," Hermione mused. "That way it would be less likely that it would be destroyed or forgotten."

"Other than the fact he didn't see fit to tell anyone," snapped Severus as he pointed at the portrait.

"Severus, my boy, had I told anyone and that information were to find its way back to the Death Eaters, your life would have been forfeit," replied Albus forlornly.

"At least then I would not have been sentenced to life in Azkaban!" Snape retorted.

"But without your help, what would have happened? How many more would have died at Hogwarts, and would the Sword of Gryffindor have made its way to the final battle," Albus asked pointedly.

Severus only glared at the portrait, knowing the old man had a point, but not willing to concede it.

Hermione decided to break up the argument. "So we go see Aberforth, and see if he kept anything. That seems to be our last hope."

"This whole thing is hopeless," muttered Severus, and he turned his back on the portrait. He knew that he never should have gotten his hopes up and should have just accepted he was pardoned and try to move on with a new life somewhere else.

Hermione placed her hand on his upper arm and looked into his eyes. "This isn't hopeless. I believe you and will do whatever it takes to make sure everyone else does, too."

There was a twinkle in the old headmaster's eye as he watched the two of them.

"Ever the optimist," Severus replied softly.

She smiled at him. "I prefer it to being a Gloomy Gus. You should try it sometime."

"There has been very little in my life to be optimistic about," he replied simply.

"I think you have something now," she responded before softly kissing him on the lips.

He was about to return the kiss when he remembered that they were not alone in the room and stiffened.

"Well, then. Since there's no further information I can provide, I'll let you see Aberforth," Dumbledore said before vanishing out of the picture frame with one last smug grin directed at the two of them, presumably returning to Hogwarts.

"Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked as though she didn't really want to move from where she was standing.

"Hogsmeade," Severus replied quietly before regaining his composure.

When they stepped outside, Hermione let Gumboil know that the portrait had not provided them with any concrete information.

It was late when they arrived at the Hog's Head, and the patrons were starting to empty out. They entered and took seats at the bar.

Aberforth came over to them. "Well, here's an unlikely duo," he remarked as he wiped the counter with his filthy bar rag. "Looking between them, he said, "I don't suppose you came here for something to drink."

This time it was Severus who took the lead, having frequented the Hog's Head in the past. "Not this time. Did your brother leave you anything in his will?"

Aberforth snorted. "Messload of old magical junk. Told them to keep it up at the castle. I've no need for that sort of thing."

"Did you send it all back or were there any items you kept?" Severus asked.

"What's it to you?" Aberforth asked suspiciously.

Hermione looked as though she was going to jump off her stool and say something, but Severus placed a calming hand on her knee. "You know what a crafty, old bastard your brother was. He may have left something for me in one of his belongings, possibly a family heirloom you might have kept."

"So nothing in it for me," Aberforth replied as he picked up a glass and wiped it with the same filthy rag.

Finally Hermione had to speak. "Dammit, Aberforth, I know you aren't as heartless as you pretend to be. Your brother seemingly left Severus to hang, and you might have something in your possession that can prove he was nothing more than a pawn. Giving a man back his life is a noble thing."

They stared at each other for several long seconds. "You damned Gryffindors. Always comes down to being noble, doesn't it?"

"You've done what's right before, and you'll do it again," said Hermione.

Aberforth looked between the two of them. "It's almost closing. Wait 'til then."

Even though they had ordered nothing, Aberforth brought them a couple of bottles of butterbeer.

Finally the pub emptied, and after locking the door, Aberforth went into the back room. He returned carrying a medium sized jewelry box which he placed on the bar before him. "This was my mothers." He then pulled a smaller box out of his pocket and held it gingerly in his hands. His eyes took on a faraway look. "This was Ariana's puzzle box. I've never been any good at figuring the damned thing out."

He held it out, and Severus took it gently in his hands and carefully began examining it. Hermione watched him intently. "It's a Muggle puzzle box," she said excitedly. "My folks gave me one for Christmas when I was seven." She reached out to take it from Severus' hand, looking for the first piece that needed to be moved, and he turned to hand it to her.

He gently placed the puzzle box onto her palm. "There is more to it than that. It has also has a charm cast on it," Severus added as he watched her take possession of the box.

Hermione could feel the gentle hum of the magic of the box and noticed a subtle change in the hum as she held it in her hands. She examined the box from all angles, trying to determine how many moving pieces it had. Hermione and her father loved puzzles, the one he had given her that Christmas had fourteen steps, but she knew that there were those with many more.

It took the better part of an hour for Hermione to find the proper steps to open the box. Severus had watched her intently most of the time while Aberforth had gone about his business, glancing at her from time to time.

Finally she felt the lid click free, and she slid it back to reveal a surprisingly large phial with a glowing, silvery, swirling liquid in it.

Severus carefully removed the phial. "A memory," he said softly.

"It could be more than one." Hermione placed her hand on his, a warm grin on her face. "We'll take it to the Ministry first thing."

He wasn't sure how he felt about that. After all, they had no idea what exactly was in the memory, and he did not like the idea of anyone at the Ministry being the first to see it. He frowned.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked gently.

"We have no idea what this memory is," he said, still staring at the silvery, luminous substance.

"The portrait told me that it is the information to prove you weren't a Death Eater," she said ardently.

He lowered his hand and looked at her. "But he also admitted he was not in full possession of all of Albus' memories."

"Why would he leave behind a memory that wouldn't help you?" Hermione reasoned, flipping her hand palm-up-wards.

He knew that she had a valid point, but it was nearly unfathomable to him that after all the suffering he had been forced to go through that he would be proven to have been Dumbledore's man through and through.

"Come on. Let's get some rest, and we'll talk about the memory in the morning." She took hold of his arm to lead him out of the Hog's Head. "Thank you for your help, Aberforth," Hermione said sincerely, leaving the open puzzle box on the bar.

The barkeep grunted at them as they left.

Severus stared at the memory contained in the phial, hardly daring to hope that it contained his absolution. He placed it protectively in his inside pocket.

When they returned to the house, he said, "I would like to view this before we turn it over to the Ministry."

Hermione considered his request. "I don't have a Pensieve, and I don't know anyone who does. Do you know anyone?"

He shook his head. "Dumbledore was the only one I knew who had one, and his is locked securely in the castle." He thought for a few moments. "I believe it would be prudent to request to view the memory in private before bringing it to the attention of the Minster or the Wizengamot so as not to waste anyone's time."

Hermione yawned, placing her hand in front of her mouth. "That's probably a good idea. Why don't you try to get some sleep before we go to the Ministry?"

He nodded and headed towards his room, but he knew that it was very unlikely he would sleep. He placed the phial on the small table in his room and stared at it, curious as to what it would show.

The next morning Severus was up early and pacing restlessly until it was time to go to the Ministry. Hermione knew that he would not feel much like conversing and let him pace. When it was nearly nine o'clock, they left for the Ministry.

As he had noticed when they were at the Three Broomsticks, people around him were whispering. He knew that even if he was exonerated there were likely to be those who would still whisper behind his back. Of course, he had been through this all before.

Hermione led him up to the Auror division where she sought out Kingsley. He knew that there were many times when Aurors used Pensieves, so he should not have been surprised. He led the two of them to an interrogation room where he gave them some privacy.

They both stared into the empty Pensieve.

Chapter 7

Severus views the memories Dumbledore left behind. Will they provide the proof that he was always loyal to Dumbledore?

A/N: Dear readers, thank you for all your wonderful reviews and I apologize for the delay in getting this chapter to you. School is out and family is visiting so we have been playing tourist. There is one more chapter that I hope to have out to you soon. I hope you have enjoyed this story and continue to enjoy it.

Chapter 7

Finally Severus pulled the phial out of his pocket and poured the silvery liquid into the bowl. He watched it shimmer for several long seconds before finally immersing himself in Dumbledore's memory.

Severus watched as his memory self paced in Dumbledore's study, explaining the Unbreakable Vow.

When he was done, Albus stared at him for a while, watching the younger man pace, then finally broke the silence. "We knew that Voldemort wants me dead. This is no surprise."

Severus continued to pace nervously. "Yes, but I have never been asked to do it. I did not expect Narcissa to extract that from me." He paused before continuing. "I cannot do it. Albus, I cannot kill you. You are the only one who believed in me, who believes that I have changed and gave me a second chance."

Albus lifted his decaying hand up off his lap. "Severus, you know that the curse is killing me."

Severus ran his hands through his hair. "I know that, but there is still the chance that I could find a counter-curse." Ever since Albus had come to him that night, he had been searching for a cure.

Albus raised his good hand in a request for silence. "We both know that is not likely. In the event that you don't, I will still die. By doing as I asked, you will make my death have meaning."

Severus fell to his knees next to Albus and clutched at the headmaster's robe. "Albus, I cannot. I've reformed. You can't ask me to do that. Ask me anything but that. I would rather die than be the one who kills you."

Albus placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Severus, I know this will be hard for you. We all knew that difficult choices would have to be made. We knew that you, in particular, would be asked to do difficult things. You have already sworn to follow my orders, no matter what. That you would trust my judgment."

Severus rose and began pacing again. "That was before you asked this!" he said desperately, flinging his hand in Albus' direction.

"Do you want to defeat Voldemort?" Albus asked pointedly.

Severus turned on him. "You know that I do. I told you that long ago," he replied shortly.

"Then you will follow my orders," Albus stated firmly, brooking no further argument. "I am not asking you to do this tomorrow. We will know when the time is right. Before I succumb to the curse, I will need you to do this. Do you understand?"

He still couldn't believe that he was going to agree to this, but the Vow compelled him to agree. "I do."

*"Very good, my boy. Now, do what you can to build your stock amongst the Death Eaters. Only through this sacrifice will our side prevail. Now, if you will excuse me, I have quite a bit of work to do."**

There was a sickening swirl as the scene shifted to later in the school year.

He and Albus were walking near the edge of the forest.

"I have done all the research I can. There is nothing further I can do to slow the curse," Severus said as he looked at the Headmaster's right arm. While he could not see it, he knew that the blackened skin was moving up the old man's arm.

"It is of little consequence given the Oath you have taken," Dumbledore said, waving off the younger man's concern.

Severus visibly recoiled even though the comment was not made as a slap. Moving on from the Headmaster's comments, Severus changed the subject of the conversation to one of his own concerns, "Are you sure that Potter is the proper person for you to trust with this? He is barely half-trained, with only a modicum of talent for it, and he is, after all, his father's son..."

"That he is his father's son is precisely why. Or more appropriately that he is his mother's son."

Once again Severus flinched. "Surely parentage does not matter that much."

"It is not parentage, but Lily's last act. That which allowed him to survive his first encounter with Voldemort is what makes him uniquely suited for the task I have given him. You are aware of the link between the two of them."

"Of course I am," Severus said shortly. "Since you have ordered me to attempt to teach Occlumency to the boy, something for which he has no talent, by the way. And that link is why he should not be trusted with this task. If the Dark Lord were to look into his mind..."

This time it was Dumbledore interrupting. "But he won't. For the same reason he could not bear Harry's touch, he cannot bear Harry's mind. That is where Lily's actions come into play. That is why it must be Harry who undertakes the task I have given him. But your task is no less important. You must remain part of Voldemort's inner circle."

Dumbledore then looked around to make sure there was no one nearby. "After you have killed me, Severus ..."

"You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small ser-vice of me!" snarled Severus, and real anger flared in his thin face now. "You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!"

"You gave me your word, Severus. And while we are talking about services you owe me, I thought you agreed to keep a close eye on our young Slytherin friend?"

Severus looked angry, mutinous. Dumbledore sighed.

"Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you. ..."

The scene shifted once again and Severus found himself wondering how many more painful memories he would have to endure.

He had half expected to see the conversation from the night after their talk by the forest, but instead he found himself pacing in the Headmaster's office, clearly on that fateful night given how tired and drawn the Headmaster looked

"I believe the time may be upon us," Albus said gently, placing his hand on his shoulder to rub the affected joint. Severus scowled, regardless of all his best efforts, the curse had progressed to his collar bone. It was days now until it either reached the old man's heart or turned to seep into his carotid artery and to his brain.

"Are you now so omniscient that you can predict the hour of your death? Oh, of course, you need only to order it of me, don't you?" Severus snapped.

Unconcerned by his protégé's outburst, Albus said, "I will soon be leaving the castle with Harry. When I return... Well, needless to say, I'm certain that whatever dark magic awaits me will take its toll. I fear my absence, unfortunately, will be noted. Whatever young Draco has planned, this will give him the opportunity to try, yet again, to get me."

"What is it you are leaving the castle to do? You have yet to fully confide in me," Severus said sharply, not wanting to argue, yet again, about Draco's task.

"And that is why you are here now. While I will not fully confide in you, there is information you will need..."

"To continue to be your pawn," Severus interrupted.

Albus raised his good hand. "To fulfill your part in defeating Voldemort... Unless you have changed your mind."

Severus stopped his pacing and glared at the old man. "I would never change my mind. That... monstrosity cannot be allowed to succeed," he growled.

Albus gestured that he wanted Severus to take a seat and waited until the younger man had done so before continuing. "Precisely why I am leaving the castle tonight. What I do tonight will hopefully give Harry the last knowledge he needs to bring down Voldemort, though it is not something likely to happen in the immediate future. He has tasks to perform that will take time. Just as you also have tasks to perform."

"Like killing you," Severus said dryly, folding his arms across his chest.

"Among others, yes. I also need you to protect the Sword of Gryffindor. I have secured it here in the castle, and in time you will learn its location."

Severus was clearly frustrated. "Then what is that on the shelf?" he asked as he pointed at what he thought was the Sword.

"A replica. But for now everyone needs to believe it is the real sword. No one need know where the real one is. It will be revealed to you in time."

"That will be excellent magic, since I'm sure my welcome here will be worn out once everyone thinks me the instrument of your death," Severus said snidely.

Albus looked upon Severus with a small sad smile, but the pale blue eyes had the audacity to be twinkling. "On the contrary, I believe that very act is what will allow you to be in the perfect position to receive that information. And you must know the same."

A pained look crossed Severus' face as he considered the Headmaster's words.

Albus rose. "Now, wait for my return. Events are about to put in motion that will bring the fated hour upon us. And remember, you are not killing me, you are releasing me from a slow and quite painful death." He placed his good hand on Severus' shoulder and the two men locked eyes, sad blue eyes devoid of their usual twinkle and hard, dark eyes.

Severus felt himself being expelled from the Pensive and stood up to find Hermione staring at him eagerly. "Well, is it the memory you needed?" she asked cautiously.

He was slightly shaken from being pulled back to that point in time. "Yes," he croaked hoarsely. He knew that when these memories were presented before the Wizengamot, that he would have to do a better job maintaining his composure. It was bad enough how he had behaved at that moment when Dumbledore had asked the unthinkable. He cleared his throat. "This should prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that I was acting on his orders." Using his wand, he put the memories back in the phial.

"Then it's time to go see the Minister," she said.

He could hear the eagerness in her voice, but his heart was still heavy with the memories he had just relived and the memory of what followed that fateful night on the Astronomy Tower when he would last look upon the man he regarded as a father.

They thanked Kingsley and left the Aurory. Severus's mind was in turmoil over what he'd had to relive seeing the memories. They walked in silence to Arthur's office, and he was glad that Hermione had the presence of mind not to try to engage him in chatter or to ask him questions. He greatly appreciated it in fact. They sat in the outer office for quite some time waiting for their turn to see the Minister. Hermione was showing her anticipation and was unable to sit still. He, on the other hand, was somberly staring at the far wall as he alternately relived the moment where he revealed the Unbreakable Vow to Dumbledore and that night on the Astronomy Tower when he was forced to act. He could still hear the old man pleading with him, not to be allowed to live, but to be freed from the painful death he was clearly suffering.

Finally, Hermione noticed that he did not seem to be mentally present and placed her hand on his knee to get his attention. "Severus, is everything okay?" she asked quietly.

He looked into her eyes and forced a smile. "It is. Even though these memories will prove my allegiance, they are not happy memories."

"I understand."

They sat in uneasy silence until they were called into the Minister's office.

"Good morning, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said cheerfully.

"So, you found proof?" he asked.

"We did. Dumbledore did leave some memories behind, but being Dumbledore he hid it quite well. Severus," she prompted.

He pulled the phial from his pocket. "This phial contains memories from the time when I revealed the Unbreakable Vow to Albus until shortly before his death. The conversations that follow should leave no doubt in anyone's mind as to where my loyalties lay."

Arthur stared at the phial momentarily. "So this is enough to convene the Wizengamot?"

"Yes," Severus replied simply.

"Well, I'll ask that you turn it over to the legal department..."

"If you please, I would like to maintain control of it. I will be more than happy to take it there and let them review it when we finish this meeting, but I would prefer to keep the memories in my possession." He knew that this was not standard practice, but these memories were his only chance to have the stigma of Death Eater and murderer removed from his name, and he did not want to risk them being lost or damaged in the Ministry.

Arthur looked first at Severus and then at Hermione who was silently pleading with him. "Well, it's unusual, but this entire situation is unusual." He grabbed a piece of parchment and wrote a quick note on it. "This should take care of legal."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said happily and ran around the desk to give him a big hug. She then took hold of Severus' hand to lead him out of the office.

He managed to slip his hand out of hers before they entered the outer office.

The wizards in the legal department weren't pleased he wasn't leaving the memory with them, but the note from the Minister of Magic had approved it. Two of them spent close to half an hour reviewing the memories repeatedly and making notes of everything that was said.

When they were finished, they returned the memories to him and handed it back to Severus with the admonition not to lose it because it would be more concrete than their transcription.

Severus glared at them because he had no intention of doing so. These memories would remain on his person at all times.

Now there was nothing to do but wait until a hearing before the Wizengamot could be convened, and neither of them had any idea how long that would take.

Since he had nowhere else to go, they were allowed to remain at the safe house until after the trial. Severus got the impression this was done as a favor to Hermione more than for his personal comfort.

That evening they were sitting at the table after dinner. "So what now?" she asked.

"We wait for the Wizengamot," he replied simply.

"Not that what. The future what," she prompted.

He had not really given it much thought. Truth be told, he had been spending quite a bit of time dwelling on the past. "I presume I will have the contents of my vault returned to me. My house... I have no idea what they've done to it, but surely the contents have been auctioned off by now." The house itself was no great loss, but to him the books were his real treasure. "I will survive."

"Anything else?" she asked.

He looked into her eyes and could see the affection she had for him. He had no idea what he had done to earn that affection, but it infused him with a happiness he had not had since his early friendship with Lily - before she fell in with Potter and broke his heart. "There is perhaps a special witch in my life who I would like to get to know better."

She reached her hand across the table and placed it on his. "I think she would like to get to know you better, too." She smiled warmly at him, letting him know the previous evening's kiss had not been unwanted.

While waiting for Severus' hearing, the two of them spent a fair amount of time in Muggle London visiting museums and in general avoiding the whispers and stares that Severus got while among members of the magical community. He quite enjoyed her company and grew less anxious about when he would finally be granted a hearing.

They were sitting in Hyde Park enjoying ice cream cones when he brought up something that had been bothering him. "I hope that I am not keeping you from work. I'm quite capable of looking out for myself."

"Oh, no, you're not. I mean..." She glanced at him quickly and then focused on a drip running down her ice cream cone.

He arched an eyebrow at her as he tried to figure out what she was trying to say. "Hermione?" he prodded.

"Well, I don't technically have a job yet. I've been trying to figure out what I want to do, doing some work with the Healers at St. Mungo's, a little work at the Ministry, some research on my own. I just... It's a big decision picking a career, and I didn't have a proper seventh year," she explained.

"Indeed," he replied simply. It suddenly occurred to him that he was faced with a similar decision. He had no reason to resume teaching, even if there was interest in restoring him to that position, which he doubted. And that had not really been a career choice that had been a survival choice.

"Have you had any more thoughts?" she asked clearly trying to change the subject.

"I had thought I might take some time to investigate some potions ideas that I have postulated over the years but have never had the time to pursue. That could translate into a profitable way to live. Presuming I am compensated for the assets the Ministry seized, it should be something I could do for some time until I have a more clear vision of what I wish to do with my life." He glanced at her and saw that she looked interested. "You have shown quite an aptitude with potions. Your assistance could make my research more fruitful."

"Really?" she asked eagerly. "I mean, I'd be honored."

He placed his hand on her cheek. "Are you sure? You know that I am not the most pleasant person."

"I like you just the way you are." They finished their ice cream in uncomfortable silence and when they were done, she said, "We should get back to the house and see if the Ministry has sent an owl yet."

Severus snorted. "As low a priority as this seems, I would not hold my breath."

"It's higher priority than you think. Mr. Weasley took a lot of risk politically to pardon you. I'm sure he has great interest in seeing you exonerated." She looped her arm in his and leaned against him as they walked to a secluded area where they could Disapparate.

Hermione was pleasantly surprised to see an owl waiting for them. She took the letter and tossed the owl a treat before it flew off. She smiled triumphantly as she read the letter. "Tomorrow at ten will be your hearing. So you see, it was important."

Severus wasn't sure what he felt at the moment. He knew that he should be happy. The truth would be revealed to all, and he should no longer be a pariah. He also knew the memories would be revealed to all. Everyone would see his moment of weakness. Including Hermione.

"Severus?" she asked, concerned that his mind seemed to have traveled elsewhere.

He looked over at her. Would she still think the same of him after she learned how he had behaved? He licked his lips. "There is something I have to tell you about tomorrow, about the memories. I would rather you hear about it from me." He then explained what transpired in the memories. Instead of pity, he saw compassion in her

eyes.

"He asked a lot out of all us, many times without us even knowing. I can understand how difficult that must have been."

"Then you don't think me a coward?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. You were probably the bravest of us. How many wizards could have fooled Voldemort? I think that you are probably the only one." After a few moments of silence, she asked, "How about I treat you to dinner?"

He wasn't sure he was ready to endure the whispers if they went to a wizarding establishment. Tomorrow night they could celebrate that way. "Only if you choose a Muggle restaurant," he offered.

The following morning they were both up early. Neither one of them spoke much, and neither felt like eating breakfast. They left for the Ministry well in advance of the hearing and were the first ones in the court room. In the fifteen minutes leading up to the hearing, the room began to fill. A wizard solicitor from the legal department found Severus, and the two of them sat at the defendant's table. Hermione sat in the first row behind them. Shortly before the hearing convened, Ron and Harry joined her.

"So, evidence turned up he was on our side the whole time?" Ron asked skeptically.

"That's what I've been told," she replied evasively. She wasn't sure why she was being so secretive about this. She knew that her relationship with Severus could not be hidden much longer. After all, she could only avoid them for so long.

"I still can't believe Dumbledore would have told anyone to kill him," Harry said.

"Come on, you two were there for his trial. He said Dumbledore was being killed by that curse that blackened his hand. It makes sense that he would want to use his death to help the cause. I mean if Voldemort hadn't trusted Snape, do you think we would have gotten the Sword of Gryffindor back?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. There's just something about him I've never trusted."

Hermione just looked at Harry and rolled her eyes since the Wizengamot were filing in as the courtroom was called to order.

The first part of the hearing was spent reviewing the facts from Severus's first trial. Then the head of the Wizengamot said, "I understand there is new evidence that has been brought to light?"

"Yes, your honor," said the wizard representing Severus, one Augustus Davies. He held up the memory phial. "Albus Dumbledore secreted these memories among his personal possessions, and it was only rediscovered a few days ago. These memories prove the testimony Mr. Snape gave in his initial trial, which unfortunately could not be substantiated at that time."

Davies waited a few moments while something that vaguely resembled a large vertical Pensieve was brought into the court room. Once it was in place, Davies pulled the memories out of the phial Severus had given him with his wand and swirled them into the vertical bowl. Displayed for all were Albus Dumbledore's memories of the night the Unbreakable Vow was revealed, of Severus' reluctance to be the instrument of his mentor's death, and the final conversation the two men had.

Hermione tried not to react too much since she knew what was going to be revealed, but seeing it all, she began to realize there were new depths to Severus. She looked at Ron and Harry who were staring at the memories in disbelief.

When the memories finished the Chief Warlock glanced briefly at the other members, before addressing the courtroom. "We will take a short recess to discuss the new evidence." With that he banged his gavel and the members of the Wizengamot retreated from the court room.

Hermione looked at the back of Severus' head, hoping he would turn to look at her, but his gaze remained fixed straight ahead.

"Well, what about that?" Ron asked. "The greasy old git was really on our side after all."

Harry was shaking his head. "I still can't believe Dumbledore would have asked Snape to kill him."

Hermione said defensively, "Come on, Harry, you saw Dumbledore's memories. You can't argue with the truth. I think it's just that you can't believe Dumbledore didn't tell you. Your whole time at Hogwarts was spent with Dumbledore telling you half-truths and just enough information to do what he wanted you to do. Why would you think he would tell you this when he wouldn't flat out give you the information on Horcruxes but made you wade through memories all sixth year?"

"I know, but it's still Snape!" he retorted.

"Yeah. I mean he hated us. I'm sure he would have been happy to see us dead," Ron added.

Hermione was frustrated by the prejudice displayed by her friends. "Do the two of you even pay attention to anything? Honestly."

"You're mental. Why are you defending him?" asked Ron. "He was horrible to you."

"Dumbledore trusted him, and we just saw that Severus never wanted to kill Dumbledore." Only after she said it, did she realize she had used his first name. Thankfully it didn't appear that either of them noticed since the members of the Wizengamot were back and resuming their seats.

Once they were settled, the Chief Warlock said, "In light of this new testimony, it is confirmed that Mr. Snape was acting at the behest of Professor Dumbledore. While the action requested by Dumbledore was most unusual, it was nonetheless requested so that Mr. Snape could retain his cover as a spy within Death Eater organization and remain at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in order to assist Harry Potter in defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. We hereby confirm that Mr. Snape was acting as a loyal member of the Order of the Phoenix, albeit in a most unorthodox manner. As such, his previous conviction as a Death Eater is overturned. Ministry officials will be in touch with him to return or compensate for possessions taken for reparations." The old wizard banged the gavel.

With the hearing over, the courtroom was abuzz with conversation. Hermione saw a *Daily Prophet* reporter hurry out of the courtroom to file his report. She smiled proudly that justice had prevailed.

"Wonder if he'll go back to Hogwarts to torment more students?" opined Ron.

"I hope not," Harry said as he eyed Snape warily. "You coming?" he asked Hermione.

"No, I've got something else to go do," she replied evasively.

He and Ron shrugged shoulders and then walked out with the rest of the crowd. She stayed back, waiting until everyone was gone. Once they were alone, she hurried over to Severus and gave him a big hug and a kiss. "I'm so glad that's over."

"Not as glad as I am," he replied once he recovered from the shock of her display of affection.

"Since it's not dinner time yet, how about a celebratory lunch?" she asked.

"If you're sure," he replied.

She nodded her head. "I am."

*Note: This passage is from Chapter 8 of the story *Wounded* I wrote previously, but it so perfectly sums up how I see that moment, I wanted to use it again here.

**Note 2: This passage comes from the scene Hagrid overheard between Snape and Dumbledore in *The Half-blood Prince*.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

Victims from a late war poisoning attack have one hope of survival - incarcerated Death Eater Severus Snape. Can he be convinced to not only help save them, but to work with Hermione Granger to do so?

A/N: Sorry my lovelies for taking so long to finish this. The muses really jumped ship years ago and I finally found them when I decided to start rereading my fanfic and found myself falling in love with the characters all over again. I hope everyone finds this a nice satisfying end.

Following the trial, Hermione did spend some time with Harry and Ron, but the two of them were still reveling in the spotlight of being war heroes and she was uncomfortable with that sort of attention, so she spent most of her time with Severus. The time she did spend with her friends was when Harry was working on the renovations to Grimmauld Place. It was a much more cheerful place than it had been, though they were still stuck with Mrs. Black's portrait in the entry.

They did talk a little about the future. Ron wanted to try out for the Chudley Cannons, having had enough dealing with Dark Wizards during the last year. Harry was looking into joining the Auror program. Hermione was evasive about what her plans for the future were, not that it seemed to surprise either of them. After all, she had been interning with various entities since soon after the end of the war, trying to determine which career path would make her happiest. She was not yet ready to tell them she was almost positive she had chosen what she would do with her future. While this was something she could not keep hidden forever, now was not the time to bring it up with the two of them. Of course, she wasn't sure there would ever be a good time. She sometimes tried to slip Severus' name into conversation, but they were still skeptical about his motives despite having viewed Dumbledore's memories. Something told her that her budding relationship would seriously strain her friendship with Ron and Harry.

When she was not working with Severus or spending time with Harry and Ron, she spent her time exploring second hand bookshops across Britain. Her Order of Merlin, First Class, had come with a significant stipend and she had decided to use some of it build a library of rare magical books. For now, she was keeping her acquisitions secret from Severus, intending to surprise him when she was satisfied with the collection.

It took close to a month for Severus to get his life in order. Surprisingly it had only taken a couple of days for him to have the contents of his vault returned to him. At that point, he had been obliged to move out of the safe house, and Hermione had returned to her parents' house. They met for dinner most nights, and if Severus was not occupied at the Ministry working on being reimbursed for Spinner's End, and more importantly its contents, they would spend days together as well. Dealing with the Ministry had involved a great deal of haggling and paperwork.

Of course much of that waiting had to do with sorting through more than six months worth of unfiled paperwork. In the wake of the war there had been many Death Eater trials, and while inventories had been taken of seized property, most of that paperwork had not yet been filed. It had been given a very low priority since there was no expectation that any of the paperwork would be needed. In order to expedite the search, Severus found himself spending many hours each day breathing down the necks of the low-level Ministry lackeys charged with the archives. Unfortunately, he could not devote his full attention to receiving appropriate reparations since he also had to begin work on assembling a working laboratory.

He had purchased a small cottage in remote location. Its advantage was having a separate shed that could be converted to a laboratory. For now he also had to collect as many of the ingredients as he could personally. Until he knew what the disposition of his finances was, he wanted to be conservative. Most afternoons Hermione would help him. She was a quick study for finding the various wild flora he required, and she was pleasant enough working on the potted plants that were quickly taking over his spare room since he had no greenhouse.

On the evenings she stayed, they would cook dinner together as Severus wanted to conserve his funds. She was a quick study in the kitchen and they soon began experimenting with more complex and gourmet recipes. After dinner they would retire to the lounge, which Severus planned to turn into a library, where they would either read while listening to the wireless or debate aspects of Severus' potions research. He found that he was enjoying her company and could see himself doing so for a good long while.

When they first began their ritual, they would sit on opposite ends of the sofa. Over time she had progressed to propping her feet up on his lap, until just a few days ago when she had started curling up against his chest. It made it difficult for him to read comfortably, but he enjoyed her closeness in a way he had never imagined possible. At his side was definitely where she belonged.

As of yet they had not discussed the nature of their relationship. They had both come to the unspoken agreement that it would wait until he received his final disposition of his property from the Ministry. Though he had the impression that both of them felt that it was destined to become something permanent.

After dinner, they retired to the lounge as usual. She crossed the room towards the wireless, when he stopped her. "Hermione, I believe we have finally located all the required paperwork and my claim is in final processing. I would like to take you out to dinner on Friday to celebrate."

She smiled at him before throwing her arms around him. "I'd be honored. Where were you thinking of going?"

He returned her smile and placed his hands on the small of her back. "I think I'd like to leave that a surprise." There would be more than one surprise.

While they read, he could tell that she was somewhat distracted. Naturally she would be trying to deduce where he might be taking her to eat.

Finally she closed her book and sat up so that she could look at him. "Since I know you won't tell me where you are going to take me for dinner, could you at least tell me how I should dress?"

He considered her question for a few seconds before answering. "Something nice, but no need to wear dress robes." He flashed her a playful grin.

"Well that's good." She checked her watch and saw that it was getting late. "I suppose you'll be at the Ministry tomorrow?"

He nodded. "I can come get you when I finish."

She wasn't sure how she felt about him showing up at her parents' house. Not that she was embarrassed about him, but because she wasn't quite sure where they fit in each other's lives and she hadn't mentioned him much to her parents. "How about we meet here? There's some work I can do in the shed while you're gone."

She thought she detected a slight hint of disappointment flit across his face. "Of course. That would be most practical," he replied.

"Then it's a date," she said cheerfully and placed her hand momentarily on his. "I'll see you tomorrow," she added before leaving.

Hermione found herself having a hard time getting to sleep. She knew that time was running out for to make a decision about which direction her relationship with Severus was going. She had been putting it off, reasoning that she should wait until Severus had finished working with the Ministry over restitution for his house, but that day was tomorrow. She truly enjoyed being in his company and that they worked well together. Despite the kisses they had shared, she was still nervous about having a romantic relationship with him. Part of it was that she knew that Harry and Ron would have a hard time understanding it. The rational part of her mind told her that she should not base her future on what Harry and Ron believed. She knew that she had to put herself first.

Finally she drifted off to sleep, but it was anything but restful. She kept waking up as her mind ran through multiple permutations.

The next morning she wasn't very well rested, but she knew that she could take a Reviving Potion that would help her last through the day. But what would she do with her day? She knew that there was work to be done at Severus's, but most of that involved getting dirty and that if they were going to dine somewhere nice, she would have to dress there and that seemed a little presumptuous despite the fact he had not objected to meeting at his cottage, though he had seemed disappointed.

As she pushed her breakfast around her plate, her mother asked, "I something bothering you, dear?"

Normally this should have been an easy answer. "I don't know."

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right?" her mother said softly while placing her hand over Hermione's.

Hermione knew that her mother longed for her confidence. Once it had been so easy, but now that she was part of a different world, it was more difficult, but she realized there was no one else she could talk with. "I know. It's just really complicated."

"Bottling it up won't solve any problems," her mother said sagely.

After pushing her eggs around a few more times, she put her fork down. "There's this man that I really like, and I think he likes me the same way, but we haven't really talked about it."

"Well, that's your first problem. If you don't talk about it, you will never know."

Hermione sighed. "I know that. But part of it is that he's quite a bit older than me."

"How much older?" Her mother asked cautiously.

"About twenty years," Hermione said reluctantly.

"Hermione," her mother started.

"I know. But it's just that we worked together on a project for the Ministry and we worked together so well. He's utterly brilliant and we've been talking since then and it's so stimulating. We have the most fantastic conversations and debates, everything I never had with Ron." She watched her mother, trying to gauge a reaction. She looked down at her plate once more, looking for some strength to continue. Finally, she looked back at her mother. "The complicated part comes from the fact that he was one of my professors at Hogwarts, one Harry and Ron didn't particularly care for," she said quietly.

"That... is problematic."

She heaved a big sigh. "I know. And this isn't a schoolgirl crush. He never treated me particularly well in class, but now... Mum, I think he could be the one."

Encouragingly, her mother said, "If that's the case, you should find out."

"I want to, but I know that if I do, I risk losing Ron and Harry's friendship. I don't know that they will ever understand it." She knew that Ron and Harry had not been pleased that Severus had been let free, even if he had loyally served Albus Dumbledore. She could only imagine what they would say when she admitted she had feelings for their former Potion's Master.

"Have you tried talking to them about it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. There were other... things going on and I didn't want to tell them anything until we had made decisions."

"Hiding the truth won't make anything better." She placed her hand on Hermione's.

"I know. But do I talk to them now or once I know whether something is happening between us?"

"That's up to you, dear."

Hermione had hoped for a better answer, but she knew it was the only one her mother could give her. "Thanks, Mum."

Hermione went back up to her room and paced for a while. Severus had said they would meet at his place around six. That meant that she should have time to see Harry and hopefully Ron before she had to meet. But should she do that before what was going to be a happy moment? Should she let her friends potentially ruin what might be the start of her relationship with Severus?

Finally she knew what she was going to do.

Severus arrived home shortly before six. It had taken some serious cajoling, but he had gotten the Ministry to agree to a fair compensation for the books he had had at Spinner's End. There had naturally been some resistance given the fact that several of those books were not ones a respectable wizard would own. At least now he knew where his finances stood. He was sure that he and Hermione would be able to make enough of a profit brewing potions that they would be able to live comfortably. And this would provide him with the funds to build a substantial greenhouse so that he could grow most of the herbal supplies that he would need so that plants weren't overrunning his house.

He headed out to the shed to tell Hermione, but found it deserted. He found this very odd since she had generally been very punctual. He began to wonder if everything had been too good to be true. If she had run, fearing a more serious relationship with him.

His mood was starting to turn dark, when he heard his front door open.

"I'm sorry I'm running late," Hermione apologized.

"Where have you been?" he tried to temper his voice so it didn't sound too adversarial.

"Nothing important," she replied evasively. "I'm looking forward to dinner with you." She smiled as she used her hands to smooth the front of his robes.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Are you?"

She stepped closer to him and put her hand behind his head to pull him down for a kiss. "I am," she replied after breaking the kiss.

He longed to wrap his arms around her and snog her senseless, but he knew that would be too forward. Besides, they had a reservation. He took a step back and offered his hand to her. "Then, shall we?"

She smiled warmly at him and took his hand. "Of course."

Dinner was fantastic. The food was excellent as was the conversation. They shared a bottle of wine because he wanted to make sure they did not overindulge to the point their senses were befuddled. He wanted them both to be relatively clear of mind when the evening was over.

Afterwards, they walked down the lane out of Godric's Hollow, enjoying the clear night. He enjoyed the way she leaned against him.

"Hermione, I've been thinking," he said.

"About what?" She asked predictably.

"About the future."

"That's a rather broad subject," she replied.

"Indeed it is," he replied simply.

"Anything specific?" she asked probingly.

"I have enjoyed your company the last few weeks. You are a truly amazing witch, and I can imagine a lifetime of conversations with you. Every night when you return to your parents' house, I find that you leave a vast emptiness."

She stopped and turned to look into his eyes. "I enjoy your company, too."

He placed his hand on her cheek. "I think that we have gotten to know each other quite well, don't you?" he asked as he leaned closer to her.

"I do," she replied as she closed her eyes and leaned towards him.

This time when he pressed his lips against her, there was no tentativeness. He pressed hard and used his tongue to part her lips. As he did so, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against him. He felt the inside of her thigh rubbing against his leg.

When he finally broke the kiss, he started nibbling at her neck, enjoying the moans he elicited. His right hand had grabbed her buttocks while his left was cupping her breasts.

As she slipped her hand in his trousers, he found himself emitting his own moan. He realized that a country lane outside of Godric's Hollow was not an appropriate place for what he had planned and he Apparated them back to his cottage.

Hermione woke the following morning as the sun filtered in through the slit between the curtains. She rolled over and draped her arm and leg over Severus.

He gently squeezed her shoulder. "So, are you ready to tell me why you were late last night?"

She considered his question a few moments. "... I decided I should tell Harry and Ron about my intentions towards you."

"And what might those intentions be?"

She knew that right now she was exactly where she should be. "To spend the rest of my life with you, putting up with your sarcastic wit and insults," she replied playfully.

"Oh, really?" he said in mock surprise. "And what did those two dunderheads think about that?"

She sighed. "They tried to talk me out of it." She really didn't want to relive that conversation. Ron had threatened to tie her up until she came to her senses. Harry was sure that she was being affected by some sort of charm or curse. In the end she had told them that if they couldn't be civil as respectful towards her, that perhaps they should stay away from each other. She looked up into his eyes. "But I'm my own person, and I know that I belong right here. I hope that some day they will come to realize that being with you makes me happy."

"Does it?" he asked, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Very." She gave him a passionate kiss to reinforce her answer. "And what about you? Does being with me make you happy?"

There was a long pause before he answered. "For the first time in my life, it does." He weaved his fingers in her hair and gave her a deep, penetrating kiss. "I think I can easily say that I am happy."

She placed her head on his chest as she hugged him tightly. "I'm glad to hear that."

~End~