

An Act of Love

by MMADfan

Severus Snape is hit by a stray spell, which has unanticipated and undesirable consequences. When he begins to feel some side-effects from the spell, Severus seeks the help of a colleague. A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22. A third place winner in the Potter Place Challenge, and a featured story at SH Occlumency for November 2007. Not DH-compliant. Completely disregards DH.

Please note ratings and warnings in individual chapters. MA content in several chapters.

One: A Surprising Spell

Chapter 1 of 16

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Author's Notes: A response to Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22. Complete Challenge text appears at the end of this chapter.



Chapter One: A Surprising Spell

From his office, Severus heard the girls' raised voices. No, not when he had just settled down with his new novel, the latest in the *Defence with No Dangers* series: this one was *Defence with No Danger is No Fun*. If it was half as good as *Defence with No Danger is No Erotomania* or even *Defence with No Danger is No Dream*, he was in for a real treat. He'd bought it last Saturday, and this was his first opportunity to sit down with it: after waiting almost a week for a free moment, he was not going to let some petty squabble in the corridor disturb him. Now that he was finally the Defence Against Dark Arts teacher, himself, the books were even more enjoyable. They were by the same author who wrote the *Potions with No Peril* series, but, in Snape's opinion, Trajan Tyne was a superior protagonist to Nero Newcastle, the Potions master in the *No Peril* novels. Newcastle tended to get into annoyingly distracting romantic trysts; Tyne was more a love'em-and-leave'em type.

Severus tried to ignore the penetrating voices, hoping they would just go away, but when another girl's shrill voice was raised above the others, he lost all hope that he would be able to concentrate on Trajan Tyne's latest adventures as a beleaguered DADA teacher surrounded by incompetent dunderheads. Sighing, Severus put his book back into its warded drawer. Given that the new voice belonged to the Know-It-All Gryffindor prefect, Hermione Granger, and the previous voices had belonged to Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, he probably ought to intervene. He might be able to take a few points from Gryffindor if he were lucky, anyway.

He emerged from his office and looked down the hallway to see the two Slytherin girls facing each other, wands out. Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy were standing next to each other, backs to him. This might be entertaining. He sidled into the shadow of a suit of armour.

"They won't listen to me, Malfoy! Aren't you going to do anything? You're a prefect, too, if you haven't forgotten."

"Watch the sarcasm, Granger. I don't know . . . it's rather gratifying to watch two witches fight over me." Draco pretended to polish his nails against his chest. "Of course, as a mudblood excuse me, a *Muggle-born* you wouldn't know what it's like to have two attractive members of the opposite sex vying for your attentions, would you?" he asked sweetly.

"*Draco Malfoy!*" Apparently giving up on him, Granger turned to the two Slytherin girls, who hadn't ceased hurling epithets at each other in the meantime. "Pansy! Millicent! Put your wands away! Just talk it over like civilized witches."

As one, the two girls turned from their exchange of insults and said, "*Shut it, Mudblood!*" then continued their argument.

"You two should be taking this up with Draco!" yelled Hermione in one last-ditch effort to get the two girls to stop fighting.

"Oh, yeah?" said Pansy. She never was a particularly articulate girl, thought Snape. "Well, maybe I just *should* take it up with Draco, then." Snarling at Millicent, she said, "I'll show you, Millicent Bulstrode, you pimple-faced Troll-Hag!" Pansy raised her wand.

Uh-oh. Perhaps it was time for him to intervene. Stepping out from behind the suit of armour, Severus was just about to raise his voice in its most stentorian but mellifluous tones, when he realised he was too late even for an *Expelliarmus*.

Furious, Pansy whirled around and cast a spell at Draco, growling the incantation. Draco ducked. Snape felt a peculiar tickling sensation crawling over his skin and into his organs, beginning with his stomach then spreading down to his groin, up to his heart, and then, finally, into his sinuses and the back of his eyes. He sneezed.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygod," he could hear Pansy saying. Yes, as articulate as ever.

Snape blinked. The little stars, which had accompanied the tickling in his eyes, dissipated.

The four students stood, a frozen tableau in front of him. Draco had blanched as white as he'd ever been, which wasn't saying much, Snape supposed. Millicent was standing motionless, wand hanging loosely in her limp mitt. The Gryffindor Know-It-All had finally been struck dumb, Snape saw, her mouth hanging open but nothing coming out of it. Pansy stood, red-faced, hand over her mouth, still repeating the same muffled expression over and over again. Severus wanted to slap her.

He didn't, however. "What was that spell, Miss Parkinson?" he asked in a low, cold voice.

Pansy stopped speaking; she only opened her mouth once or twice, like a particularly stupid Hufflepuff doing an imitation of a goldfish.

"I *asked* you a question, Miss Parkinson. Did the spell rebound upon you and cause you to lose your ability to speak sensibly?"

"N-n-no, sir," Pansy whispered.

"I presume you *do* know what spell it was that you cast."

"Yes, sir," breathed Pansy.

"Well? I am waiting, Miss Parkinson. I am a *patient* man, but even *my* patience can be strained," Severus said with a sneer. "I will begin to take a point from Slytherin for each second that passes if you do not tell me immediately what that spell was!" He narrowed his eyes and gave her his best I-can-see-what-you're-thinking-so-don't-bother-to-lie-to-me look.

Pansy choked and sputtered, glancing at Draco as if to see if he would rescue her. When no salvation was forthcoming and Snape had proceeded to count, reaching three, Pansy blurted, "It was *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus*, sir."

Snape blanched as white as Draco had, which wasn't difficult.

"Do you know what that spell does, Miss Parkinson?" he choked out.

"It makes someone reveal their true love?"

"It does not. It forces the object of the spell to *act* on their affections for their true love. You are a *fool*, Miss Parkinson," Snape spat. "You may be ambitious, but you possess no other traits of a true Slytherin! Do you even realise that there is no counter-spell for it? Of course not."

"B-b-but, sir, it won't work on everyone; it said so in the book."

"The *book!* You are beginning to sound like this Know-It-All Gryffindor. You can't learn everything from a book, can you, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, turning to the sixth-year Gryffindor who was one of the three banes of his existence. Well, one of the five banes, actually, but when you were as baned as he was, who counted?

"No, sir," answered Hermione, barely moving her lips. She was looking at Snape as though she thought he might go off his rails at any moment and begin attacking random witches. She had backed against the wall, next to Draco and slightly behind him.

So much for the highly vaunted Gryffindor courage, Severus scoffed to himself. "And you, Mr Malfoy. You are a prefect. I did not notice you attempting to diffuse the situation before it got out of hand. If you had been less fortunate, you would have been the recipient of that spell and not I."

"Do you feel all right, sir?" Draco asked solicitously.

"What do *you* think, Draco?" Snape smirked. "I have not yet fallen into a swoon, have I?"

"But, sir, you glowed when the spell hit you," the Slytherin prefect replied, his brows knit with worry. He really did seem concerned for his Head of House. Snape would have to reward him for his acting skills later.

"Clearly, that was a side-effect of the spell."

"Professor Snape " Oh, gods, the Gryffindor had found her voice! Now he wouldn't be able to shut her up.

"Professor Snape, you didn't just . . . *glow*. There were *sparks* coming out of your body. From . . . particular . . . areas. Gold and red sparks, sir."

Gryffindor! Of course she would note the colour of the sparks and think they were significant just because they were her House colours.

"Meaningless, Miss Granger. A mere side-effect of the spell, which clearly had no effect on me," he said dismissively. Snape could just hear the student gossip mill churning out the news: *Snape has no heart! The greasy bat-of-the-dungeons doesn't love anyone!* Naturally, no one would ever assume that the spell had no effect on him because he already had found "true love" and had acted upon it. Not that he *had*, of course, but it might be nice, *just once*, to be thought of as having a tender side. No, it wouldn't! Definitely *not*! The spell must have had some residual side-effects, if he was thinking such dotty thoughts.

"Miss Parkinson, you will have detention with Mr Filch for the next week." Just as Pansy was breathing a sigh of relief, Severus added, "And if there are any other untoward effects of this *curse*, rest assured that your punishment will not stop at that!" Turning to the Gryffindor, he said, "Don't you have somewhere to be, Miss Granger?"

He smirked at her muttered, "Yes, sir, of course," and was amused to see Draco following close on her heels, lest he be the next target of his Head of House's wrath.

"*You*, Miss Bulstrode, will serve detention with Professor Hagrid for three nights this week the three nights of his choosing. I shall advise him to select . . . suitable tasks for you."

Millicent flushed darkly and nodded.

"What are you waiting for? Go!" Snape dismissed the block-like girl.

When they were alone, Snape stared at Pansy, hard, delighted to see her swallow nervously several times.

"You are very fortunate, as well, Miss Parkinson, that the spell did not hit Draco. You may not have liked what you discovered, and, for that matter, he might not have either. And for a Slytherin, being forced to act on his passions toward a secret love one that might even have been a secret to him would have been humiliating. And do not think that the object of his affection was necessarily either you or Miss Bulstrode. It could be someone entirely inappropriate and a good Slytherin has the self-control and cunning to avoid such entanglements, even if subconsciously drawn to them. You would not wish to do that to a fellow Slytherin, would you, Miss Parkinson? It would take away his free will much better to inveigle the young man into choosing you for the correct, Slytherin reasons, don't you think?"

Pansy thought about what Professor Snape said. Yes, the spell was a bit like brute force something an unimaginative Gryffindor might employ much better to be cunning, as he said, and use brute force as a last resort. "Yes, Professor. You are right."

"Of *course* I'm right, girl!" Snape shook his head in disgust. "And be thankful for small favours, Miss Parkinson, that it appears your spell had no particularly untoward effects on me." He smiled slightly for the first time, just the corners of his mouth quirked upward briefly.

"Yes, sir! I'm very glad about that!" Pansy gave him what she no doubt thought was an engaging smile, then giggled.

"Hmpf," Snape snorted, in what could have been a laugh. "Well, off with you now and don't forget your detention with Mr Filch, beginning tonight!"

Severus strode back into his office, closing his door behind him. He slumped back against the door. For all his protestations that the spell had had no effect on him, he did feel peculiar. He crossed the room and slouched into his chair. He considered the novel he had put in his desk drawer before he had left his office. For some reason, Trajan Tyne's erotic manipulations as he once again saved his colleagues and students from their myriad follies no longer held any interest for Severus. Perhaps that spell *had* done something to him. He felt restless and listless at the same time. Severus wanted to get out of his chair, run from his office, and find . . . find . . . find he-didn't-know-what. He also just wanted to stay there behind his desk, lay his head in his arms, and pine . . . pine . . . pine for he-didn't-know-what.

Severus groaned aloud. Ah, that felt better! The relief was fleeting, however. He groaned again. He sighed with relief. There was ~~was~~ *definitely* something wrong with him. He didn't want to go see that Pomfrey woman. Oh, she was competent enough, and, under Dumbledore's orders, she kept her mouth shut about the number of peculiar injuries she treated him for, not even recording them in his medical history; but Pomfrey seemed a gossip, and since this was a school accident and not an injury received in service to Dumbledore, he knew he could not rely on the Hufflepuff's discretion.

He supposed he could see Albus. The Headmaster certainly knew his way around spells and charms, including more Dark ones than most people would have expected. The trouble was Severus let out another groan and then a sigh of relief Albus would twinkle and jest and make all kinds of double entendres. Severus didn't think he could bear that in his current state.

Running through the list of possible candidates in his mind witches and wizards who knew a thing or two about spell-damage and who were competent with a wand Severus immediately dismissed almost every name as soon as it occurred to him. Remus. God, no. Moody. Only if he had a death wish. Severus groaned again. Tonks. Don't make me laugh I couldn't if I wanted to. Arthur. Too enthusiastic. Molly. Too mothering. Filius. Too much like Albus. Severus banged his head on the desk. Who? *Bang!* Who? *Bang!* Who? *Bang!* Wonderful: now he had a headache, as well. Finally, with a groan and a sigh, he acknowledged that there was one witch blessedly nearby in the castle who would not twinkle, jest, torment, enthuse, mother, or anything else on that order. She would be discreet, as well, Severus believed. She might smirk a bit; he couldn't blame her if she did, although he *would* complain about it *after* she had helped him, of course. But she could be counted on to take care of his problem in a businesslike manner, he was confident. And she wouldn't make his life too hellish afterward. He groaned and sighed again. God, that felt good . . .

Although Severus had told the students that there was no counter-spell to the one Pansy had cast, he wasn't really sure of that. He was in no fit state to discover one, if there was. Clearly, because he had no true love, the spell was having a peculiar effect on him. There might be a remedy for that effect, even if there were no counter-spell. Severus forced himself to lift his head up off the desk, stand, and leave his office. If there was a little less billow-and-sweep to his robes than usual, he was not going to cavil about it; at least his back was straight as he strode down the corridors, and he wasn't giving in to the urge to groan and sigh, regardless of the relief it might provide him. In a short time, Severus hoped, he would have found permanent relief for his problem; he quickened his pace.

Severus finally reached his destination and rapped decisively on the portrait frame. A moment later, the door opened before him. He wanted to speak, but couldn't. He took one gasping breath before a tingling and tickling crawled over his skin and into his body, much as when Pansy had first cast the spell. His vision went dark but for the stars that swam before his eyes. One step forward, and he collapsed into the astounded witch's arms.

When Severus came to, he became aware that he was lying on a settee, a warm, wet flannel on his forehead, and also aware of the weight of another person sitting on the edge of the settee beside him. Moreover, this person was holding one of his hands.

"Severus? Severus? Are you all right?"

He moaned in response.

"Severus, can you open your eyes?"

He would try . . . for her. He knew it would cause him pain, but he would open his eyes. He forced them open. On seeing her face, genuine concern written in its features, Severus cried out and closed his eyes again. He tore his hand from hers and covered his face. "Oh, gods, no!" he moaned, unconcerned at that moment that he was as inarticulate as Pansy Parkinson.

"Severus, what happened? Please tell me! Has something happened? Are you ill? Were you cursed? Please, Severus!"

As much as he wanted, he could not tell her; he could not speak. If he were to speak, he could only tell her of his love for her, the love that had burned in him for so many years, banked over, but still there. Dismissed, ignored, unacknowledged, but true. His true love. Severus rolled over on the tiny couch, turning his back to his love, almost shoving her off onto the floor in the process.

He felt her rise up off the couch. So graceful. She was always so graceful. Severus groaned, but it brought little relief. He turned over fully onto his stomach and buried his face in his arms. He felt her hand gently touch his shoulder. Oh, how he needed her!

"Severus, please, tell me what is wrong . . ."

He could hear her concern for him as she spoke. How Severus loved the sound of her soft voice! But he couldn't bear her touch, her solicitude. He would go mad wanting more than what she would or could give him. And he loved her. He couldn't take what he wanted from her. He could not hurt her, and what he wanted from her was not something that *could* be taken, even if he *didn't* care whether he hurt her. Uttering a loud moan, Severus lifted his head and began banging it rhythmically against the arm of the settee.

"Stop it, please, Severus! Stop it! Please," she begged, desperate.

Severus stopped banging his head and sighed; at least there was *some* relief to be had in this world, even if it were not in the form of his true love. He choked back a sob. He should have just stayed in his office and read Trajan Tyne's adventures; *Tyne* never would have got himself into such a predicament.

From where he lay, Severus heard the sound of Floo-Powder igniting in a grate, then the call, "Headmaster's office." Severus suppressed a groan. This was *not* happening to him.

"Albus, Albus, you must come quickly. Something is dreadfully wrong with Severus!"

A whoosh from the fireplace indicated that the Headmaster had Flooed through. He heard their whispered conversation, her voice urgent with worry. At least she was worried about him, Severus thought. She hadn't kicked him out, or Levitated him in his humiliation through the halls of Hogwarts toward the Hospital Wing. How could he ever leave here? How could he ever leave *her*? But he couldn't possibly stay . . . Severus moaned.

"Severus knocked at my door, Albus, just a few minutes ago. When I answered, he looked perfectly normal for a moment, but then red and gold sparks flew from his body and he collapsed into my arms. He had passed out, so I put him on the couch and conjured a warm, wet flannel for his forehead. I haven't wanted to leave him. He hasn't been able to speak more than a few words since he regained consciousness. Just a minute ago, he seemed to have some kind of fit and was banging his head against the arm of the couch. Albus, what could be wrong with him? Could it be . . . You-Know-Who?"

"It may be . . . What did he say when he regained consciousness?"

"Only, 'oh, gods, no.'"

Severus heard Albus walk over to him, then felt his hand on his shoulder.

"Severus, my boy, can you roll over and look at me?"

"No," came the muffled reply.

"No? Hmm. Can you tell me what's wrong?"

"No. It's too terrible." Severus gave in and moaned lowly.

"Too terrible?" Severus could hear the alarm in Albus's voice. "Does this have anything to do with "

"No. No. An accident. A *horrible* accident." Severus choked back a sob. He could not cry in front of her or Albus.

"Severus, I have to insist that you roll over and look at me. I need to see you and speak to you if I am to help you. Come, now, my boy, please."

Severus steeled himself. He had faced the Dark Lord, surely he could face this. He rolled over, eyes closed.

"Open your eyes for me, my boy," Albus directed.

Severus opened his eyes. He saw, with relief, Albus standing next to the settee, in full possession of himself and his powers, despite his injured hand. If anyone could help free him from the spell, it would be Albus. Severus almost cried at the thought. Free? He did not want to lose his love . . . but he didn't *have* a love to lose, now, did he? That thought was like a dagger through his heart, and Severus closed his eyes and moaned. The relief was not as great as it had been when he'd been in his office, but it was something. Perhaps if he groaned and continued groaning, he would feel better. But now Albus was here. Severus opened his eyes again, hoping Albus would fix everything for him. Just then, the witch of his dreams and his nightmares stepped behind Albus and into Severus's field of vision.

"Oh, gods, no, no, no!" Severus cried, covering his eyes with one arm and his mouth with the other. How he wanted to tell her of his love, to demonstrate it through sweet kisses, to lie with her and hold her all day and all night. Severus groaned loudly and rolled over, falling with a thunk to the floor, where he knelt, curled into a fetal position, and moaned.

Albus's knees cracked as he settled himself on the floor beside his Defence Against Dark Arts teacher. Laying a tentative hand on Severus's back, he asked, "Did you have a potions accident, Severus?"

"Nnnnoo," moaned Severus.

"Did you hurt someone, my boy?"

"When?" came the squeaked reply.

"Just now, in the last few hours or so. Is that what the horrible accident was?"

"No," Severus mumbled.

"Did someone curse you?"

"Yes, no, yes, nooo . . . oh-oh-ooohh!" Severus began to rock back and forth.

"Oh, Albus, isn't there something you can do for him! He's suffering so!"

Hearing the dulcet tones of his love turned harsh with worry was more than Severus could bear. "Please, Albus, out," he gasped. "Please, she must leave, please. She can't stay. Oh, no no no no no," he cried remorsefully at his cold-hearted request.

"My dear, could you step into the other room, please?"

Severus heard his love's light tread as she crossed the room and left, left him. He moaned softly at his loss, vaguely aware that this was all quite ridiculous, ~~that~~ was ridiculous, and that Albus would be quite justified in having a good laugh at his expense.

After the door had clicked shut, Albus said, "Can you look at me now, Severus? She's gone."

Severus rolled over onto his side and uncurled slightly. He raised his eyes to Albus's and saw no hint of humour in them, only concern.

"Albus, I'm so sorry, Albus."

"Hush, now, my boy. I don't even know that you have anything to be sorry about!" Albus patted his arm gently. "Now, were you cursed or hit with a spell of some sort?"

"Yes," Severus whispered, glad of an easy question.

"A spell?"

Severus nodded.

"Was it cast by a student?"

Severus nodded again, closing his eyes.

"You said it was an accident did the student mean to hit someone else?"

"Yes."

"Severus, this is going to go very slowly if I have to play Twenty Questions with you. There are more than two hundred fifty students in this school." He sighed when Severus showed no sign of elaborating on his responses. "Was it a seventh-year?"

"No."

"Was it a sixth-year?"

"Yes."

"Was it a Gryffindor?"

Severus shook his head with a grimace. He wished it had been.

"A Slytherin?"

"Yes," Severus whispered.

"Was it a boy?"

"No."

"All right. That does narrow the field some . . . of the five, I'd say Pansy Parkinson is the most likely candidate. Was it she, Severus?"

Severus nodded and tried not to moan.

Albus patted Severus gently again. "Were there any witnesses?"

"Yes."

"Any not in your House?"

"Granger," he responded. Oh, the humiliation of it all!

"Very good, Severus! Can you tell me a little more? Do you know what spell it was?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"I gather that it didn't take full effect immediately. Hmm," Albus pondered. "Do the witnesses or witness also know what this spell was?"

"Gods, yes. Oh, how humiliating!" Severus scrunched his eyes shut tighter.

"Very good, Severus! Well, not that you're *humiliated*, my boy, of course not," Albus said as he rubbed Severus's back with his left hand. "But ~~its~~ good that you're talking to me. What was the spell, my boy? Hmm?"

"Oh, Albus, you will hate me. She will hate me. I ~~will~~*die*," Severus ended with a dramatic wail.

"Severus, have I hated you for anything else? No! I certainly will not hate you for an accident over which you had no control. I'm sure that no one will. And you ~~will~~*not* die, not if I can help it. You surely know that by now."

Severus lifted tear-filled eyes to meet Albus's. He swallowed hard. Albus was one of the banes of his existence, but he cared about the old man despite that. And Albus was no Dark Lord. "It was an *Adfectus* spell, Albus."

"An *Adfectus*?" Albus asked slowly. He gently stroked Severus's hair back from his face, then began to rub his back again, making calming circles. "Which ~~Adfectus~~*Adfectus*, Severus?"

Severus whimpered and closed his eyes again. What he would do for a nice *Crucio* rather than this agony! Whispering, he replied, "*Adfectus Amor Verissimus*."

"I see. Yes, I see." The circles he made did not slow or falter. "Was it a ~~Revelare~~*Revelare* or an *Actus*?"

"*Actus*," Severus whispered.

"*Actus*. Hmm. And may I guess that you were not immediately affected?"

"No, I wasn't," Severus whispered. "I just felt odd. Peculiar and not myself. I was only coming here for help, Albus, honestly."

"And when Minerva opened the door?" Albus prompted.

Still unable to look at Albus, Severus said, "You know that it is she, Albus. It hit me as soon as I laid eyes on her that it is she and no other. Then I must have passed out." Severus swallowed. Albus hadn't ceased the calming strokes to his back. Severus opened his eyes. He saw only concern and compassion, and no pity or anger, in the old

wizard's face. "I knew I could not tell her. If I spoke, I would tell her. I could not," he whispered hoarsely. "But the spell . . . the spell is demanding, Albus."

"Yes, the imperative of that particular spell is very strong, indeed. I think you have done very well, Severus." Albus ceased rubbing the younger wizard's back and placed a warm, comforting hand on his shoulder. "We will see what we can do for you, my boy. In the meantime, we need to get you more comfortable. I think that lying on the couch rather than the floor might be a good start, hmm?"

Severus let the older wizard help him to his feet. They both sat on the couch.

"I'm so sorry, Albus. I wish . . . I wish it hadn't happened. Or that it wasn't . . . Minerva."

Albus smiled and put an arm around his shoulders. "You just have very good taste in women, my boy, and you have proven yourself to me, once again." At Severus's quizzical look, Albus replied, "*Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus* is truly about love, not just lust, Severus, although I'm sure that is a part of what you're experiencing now." Severus reddened and hung his head in shame. Albus continued, "No truly Dark wizard would love Minerva McGonagall. As I said, you have very good taste."

"As you are very well aware, Albus," said Severus, feeling somewhat relieved after having expressed something of his feelings toward his love, although not directly to her, "she loves another, and, unless I am very mistaken, that wizard loves her, too." Hot tears gathered in his eyes as he said these words. "Or *don't* you, Albus?" he added bitterly.

"Of course I do, Severus," Albus replied softly. "But I love you, too." At Severus's alarmed expression, Albus quickly amended, *Not* the same way, of course. But I do not want you to suffer, certainly."

Severus sighed deeply and placed his head in his hands. "What am I to do, Albus? This minor relief that I am experiencing, no doubt because I expressed . . . my feelings for her to you, is temporary, I am sure. I already can feel an urgency rising in me again, telling me that I must act on my feelings. What can I do?"

"I think you must tell Minerva, Severus."

"No!" Severus exclaimed. "I cannot do that. *Never*. Ooohh!" Severus let out a moan and tipped over onto his side, fortunately remaining on the couch.

"Severus, she will understand, I promise she will. If you like, I will tell her first so that it won't be quite as much of a shock to her."

"No! That would be worse. Oh, gods!" Despite himself, he began to rock slightly.

"Would you love someone who would be cruel to you in your hour of need, Severus?"

"I joined the Dark Lord, didn't I?" Severus spat bitterly.

"You may have been looking for love and acceptance, but I doubt that you believed you had found it even when you joined him," Albus replied quietly. "But do you honestly see Minerva in the same light as . . . the Dark Lord?"

"No," Severus whispered. "No, of course not."

"Let me fetch her, then. I will remain in the other room and let you speak with her alone, all right?"

Severus turned his face to look at the older wizard. "You trust me with her?"

"Completely, Severus. Completely, no matter what you do. Do you understand me, my boy? No matter *what* you do." Albus stood and reached out his left hand to push Severus's hair back from his face. Severus felt a fresh, cool breeze flow over him.

"What was that? What did you just do?"

"Just a cooling and cleaning charm. Your eyes were a bit red and puffy. You do want to look your best for Minerva, don't you?" Albus asked gently.

Severus could scarcely believe his ears. "You are improving my appearance so that I can look better for your, your, your " Severus stuttered, incredulous.

"One might try 'paramour' or 'lover,' I suppose. I prefer 'beloved,' myself," suggested Albus mildly.

Albus left the room. Severus stretched out on his side. His feet hung off the end now that he was not curled up. Resigned to a fate of humiliation and disgrace, Severus shucked off his short boots. If he was going to make more of a fool of himself, it wouldn't matter whether he was wearing his shoes or not. He curled up slightly and hugged a throw pillow to his chest.

Albus was going to send her out to see him. He should have left on his boots and fled. But he couldn't. It was probably the spell, but he lacked any will to leave the room. And Minerva would *have* to emerge at some point. These were her rooms, after all. What could he possibly say to her? He would express his feelings for her; he would have to. He could fight it, but eventually the spell would force him act on his feelings. The thought made a part of him quite ill. He was a Slytherin and a Death Eater a secretly or not-so-secretly reformed Death Eater, but one never left the Mark behind, nor the wickedness that drove one to it. He should not be having these feelings, let alone expressing them to someone anyone. Especially not to one such as Minerva. Nothing could come of it, even if the Dark Lord hadn't returned, even if Minerva didn't already belong to someone else.

Severus grimaced miserably. He would *kill* Pansy Parkinson. Slowly. No, he would let her live a long life and torment her daily. Small, regular torments, like Chinese water torture, bringing her just to the brink of madness but never over it. That thought, which normally would have brought a glimmer of joy to his dark soul, did nothing to cheer Severus now.

A few minutes passed, and Severus began to worry about what Albus was telling Minerva. ~~He~~*had* made it clear, hadn't he, that he didn't want Albus to explain everything to her? Severus looked up with alarm as the door to the bedroom open and Minerva came in. Severus sat up, swallowing. He shouldn't have removed his shoes. Minerva sat in the armchair across from and to one side of the sofa.

"Albus told me that one of the students cast a spell that accidentally hit you and that you were coming to me for help."

Severus nodded. What else had he told her?

"He said that the full effect of the spell did not occur until after I opened the door to you."

He nodded again, afraid what he would say to her if he spoke.

"Albus said . . . he said that you are embarrassed by your behaviour after you arrived here."

Severus just hung his head.

"Please don't be, Severus. I was only concerned about you." When Severus didn't reply, Minerva continued. "He also told me that you have something important to tell me, something to do with the spell that hit you."

Severus nodded. He waited for her to continue. When it finally became evident that she was not going to, he looked up at her. His heart pounded. How had he not known that he loved her? How had he been able to be so, so . . . *ignorant* for all these years? For he had no doubt that he had loved her for years. Not since he was a student, no. But he had come to love her during those first years they had taught together. Minerva had accepted him without comment when he arrived at the school to teach. Surely she had known from the very first day why he was here, why Dumbledore had hired him, and what he was. But she had treated him as she would any new colleague. She was even kind to him, in a quiet, unobtrusive way. He had been able to accept her kindness because it was delivered in such an ordinary, routine manner. She had never made him feel beholden to her. Not about her kindnesses, anyway. Other things, ordinary inter-House school rivalries, perhaps. But never because he was Severus Snape, repentant Death Eater.

And Minerva's wit! She had a dry, acerbic wit that could match his, but without the truly nasty edge that his could take on. Minerva rarely cracked a smile, but her eyes would crinkle slightly as her tart tongue delivered a scathing and humorous comment. He didn't know how he would have survived the last year with Umbridge in the castle if it weren't for her sarcastic remarks at the staff table, delivered *sotto voce*, loud enough for him and a few others to catch, but just out of Umbridge's hearing.

Part of the reason he had never realised how he felt about Minerva must have stemmed from his knowledge that the Headmaster and his Deputy had a particularly "close" relationship. Severus hadn't known *precisely* how close the two were until he had been on the staff for a few years. But even had he ever entertained any idea, in the abstract, that Minerva could be interested in him, he knew that he could never compete with Albus Dumbledore. And he surely would not want to try. It would be a poor way to repay Albus, even for Severus.

Minerva was still waiting. He cleared his throat. "Two Slytherins were arguing. Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode," he began. Minerva nodded at him encouragingly. "I came out of my office to see if I should intervene or not. Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy were there. They are prefects. I thought I would let them handle it." Severus blushed. He did not want to lie to her. "I thought . . . I thought it might be amusing to watch. Anyway, Miss Granger had no success in ending the argument, which began to look as though it might come to hexes. When Miss Parkinson raised her wand, I stepped out of the shadows to stop her. I thought she was going to jinx Miss Bulstrode, but she turned and cast a spell at Draco. She and Miss Bulstrode had been arguing about him. Anyway, he ducked. I didn't. The spell hit me."

"What was the spell, Severus?" Minerva asked quietly, her soft burr trilling the R in his name. A thrill went through him, and he lowered his head again, letting his hair fall around his face.

"*Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*," Severus whispered, softly but distinctly. When Minerva didn't reply, he glanced up. She was looking at him. There were tears in her eyes.

"I am sorry, Severus."

"Don't be sorry. I don't want you to be sorry," he said bitterly. "Don't you know what this means?"

"I think so. When I opened the door, you looked at me, and then a glow came over you and red and gold sparks flew from your body. The spell took effect at that moment, didn't it?"

Severus nodded. "Albus says . . . Albus says . . . I have to tell you . . . But I can't."

"Albus often knows what's best. Not always, of course, but often."

Severus did not respond, only looking down again. He felt Minerva sit beside him. Her hand touched his shoulder tentatively.

"When you collapsed like that, Severus, I was frightened. And when you wouldn't speak to me and started to moan and bang your head, I was terrified. ~~Not~~ you, Severus, *for* you. Please speak to me now." Her hand, as Albus's had, began to describe circles on his back, gently soothing him through his robes. She reached out her other hand, offering it to him, palm up.

He looked at her soft, white hand, and took it in his own. "I love you, Minerva." The relief was immediate. He shuddered and sighed and lifted her hand to his face, not kissing it, merely holding it against his cheek. As his relief sank in, shame began to creep over him. "I am sorry, Minerva," he whispered, releasing her hand.

"Sorry? Whatever for?"

"I am sure that the last thing you ever wanted to hear were *those* words coming out of *my* mouth," Severus said bitterly.

"Look at me, Severus Snape," Minerva replied sternly, then, more gently, she said, "Look at me *please*, Severus."

He raised his head. In a gesture reminiscent of Albus's, Minerva raised her hand and gently brushed the hair from his face, first one side and then the other. "Severus, that is the greatest untruth I have ever heard come from you."

"I don't need your pity, Minerva."

"Good, for I haven't any to offer you. I do not know what we will do about this situation we are in, Severus, but I ~~will~~ not let you suffer because of the foolhardy actions of an adolescent girl."

"They *are* my feelings, though. The spell did not manufacture them," he said hoarsely.

"I know that, Severus. That is why I am not unhappy to hear you tell me that you love me."

Severus flinched at her words.

"What do you know of this spell, Severus?"

"It requires the object of the spell to act on his or her feelings for his true love. Until he does, he will grow more and more miserable. Eventually, the object of the spell will be unable to eat or sleep. Death eventually follows." Severus recited these sequelae drily, as though they had no bearing on his own life.

"The 'object of the spell,' Severus? You *are* speaking of yourself, you know," Minerva said. "But we will not allow those things to happen to you, Severus, dear. You must know that, too."

"Albus needs me," Severus replied in a whisper. Clearing his throat again, he continued, "I am his only spy and necessary to"

Minerva cut him off. "You foolish man! Do you truly believe that is all that we care about? Even if it were all that ~~Al~~bus cared about, which I can guarantee is not the case, what of me?"

"I'm sorry, Minerva. It is the only way that I can . . . that I can keep myself from saying such things that you could not bear to hear even were I able to bear to utter them," he said quietly.

"Do not tell me what I can and cannot bear, Severus Snape. I have borne more than you may imagine," Minerva retorted sharply. She sighed. "There is more to that spell than you have stated. I will need to do some research, refresh my memory, of course, but I can tell you that with each expression of affection toward your true love, that is, toward me, you will gain some relief. The relief will be temporary, as you may have already noticed, and each time that you express your feelings, you will need to do so to a greater extent than the last. In the beginning, a greater expression of those feelings will result in greater and longer lasting relief, but the desperation will increase more

quickly as the relief wears off. It is better for the longevity of the spell to start with smaller gestures of affection and increase them slowly. In the end, only the ultimate expression of your feelings will release you from the imperative of the spell. For most men and women, you can probably imagine what that ultimate expression is, Severus."

Severus turned his face from her. "Better to get it over with quickly, then. I will attempt to teach my classes for as long as I can, but Albus had better see if he can get someone in to take over soon. Moody, much as I can't stand the man, might do it. He'd be happy enough to see me dead, at any rate."

"Dead? What are you going on about, Severus? Do you think I would allow you to die? I care for you too much, Severus, to allow such a thing."

"You would rather . . . suffer my pathetic presence in your life, spouting idiocy upon idiocy, and then bear my touch, perhaps even my embrace, or worse?" Severus asked cynically.

"You may not have noticed, Severus, but you took my hand again a moment ago, and you have been holding it ever since. I have not fainted or drawn away in disgust yet."

Severus looked down at their joined hands. "I cannot help myself, Minerva, I love you. You are beautiful, you are graceful, you are brilliant and kind. Given a chance, I would find other words to express what you are to me, Minerva, what you mean to me. You are . . . the best thing in my life." Severus swallowed. He hated saying such things, and yet saying them felt so good. Much better than groaning and sighing had. He had to acknowledge his pitiful state, though. *He* could recognise it; surely she could, as well. "It must sound ridiculous to you. Pathetic, even. We are barely even friends, and yet I "

"Severus, you don't believe that, do you? That we are barely friends?" At his slight nod, Minerva sighed. "That saddens me more than you could possibly imagine. Did I not just tell you that I care for you? Care for you deeply?"

"You say that, yes," Severus replied disconsolately. "But is it the truth? I know who *and what* I am, Minerva."

"I would have told you the whole truth as soon as you told me of the spell that hit you, Severus, but I did not think that you would believe me, nor that it was the appropriate thing to say under these circumstances. I am still unsure of the wisdom of such a revelation."

Severus straightened and released Minerva's hand. "Tell me now, Minerva. Tell me. I doubt it will kill me . . . yet." He smiled grimly.

"First, I know that you cannot promise to believe me belief cannot be forced but I do ask that you agree that I do not lie to you, Severus. Have you known me to lie to you to *deliberately* tell you something that I knew was not true?"

Severus thought back over all of the years he had known her. He could remember times when she had been mistaken, but he could not think of an occasion on which she had out-and-out lied to him. That was one of the things that made him love her.

"You do not lie to me, Minerva; you are one of the rare people in my life who has not lied to me, repeatedly," he admitted.

"Then hear this and know that it is true: I love you, Severus Snape. Before you protest, I will acknowledge that I do not love you as I love Albus. I could never love anyone else that way despite some efforts in my youth," she said with a smile. "But I *do* love you. Certainly as a friend, a close friend. I admire and respect you, but I am also terribly fond of you. True, you are infuriating, and I have occasionally been . . . less than happy with some of your actions here at the school, but that has not diminished my positive regard for you. I have often wished that you were more . . . approachable and that circumstances did not require us to maintain a particular public image of our relationship. I am sorry, though, that you yourself have not realised, after all these years, how much you mean to me and how important your friendship has been. I do love you, Severus. These are not words that are easy for me to say, and not because it is you to whom I say them. You have known me a long time. You must know that I am somewhat reticent with my feelings, unlike some Albus, for example."

Severus cringed at the mention of Albus's name. "It hurts to know that you love him and that he loves you. It never hurt before. I never even gave it a thought," he said huskily. He looked up at Minerva. "I do believe you, though, Minerva. Perhaps only because I am pathetic and I want to believe you."

"You are *not* pathetic, Severus, although if you continue to repeat that you are, you will begin to seem so."

Severus sighed heavily. He certainly *felt* pathetic. He may not want Minerva to feel sorry for him, but nothing was going to stop him from feeling sorry for himself. The imperative was not particularly strong at the moment, but the mention of Albus had settled a greater gloom than usual over his soul. He could take some solace in the words she had spoken and the Death Eater in Severus cringed at the thought that she loved him, even if only as a friend.

Severus looked over at Minerva, wondering whether she would eventually decide that he *was* pathetic. Still, she had seemed willing; perhaps he might ask her a favour. "May I . . . may I, please . . ."

"Yes, Severus? What is it you would like?"

"Oh, Minerva, may I please hold your hand again?" He hoped he hadn't whined.

"Of course. But I will need it back," she said with only a slight smile; Severus was fairly sure she wasn't laughing at him. Minerva continued, "I think we should research this spell. See if there is any other way of breaking it."

"Yes, of course." Severus held Minerva's hand to his chest; his eyes were closed, and he gave a deep sigh of relief. "But I'm afraid that I will not be much good. I will try, for your sake, Minerva, but my mind is so filled with thoughts of you, I don't think that I will be able to understand anything I read." Severus felt like pouting, but he wouldn't. Well, perhaps just a little, just to himself. Why did this have to happen to *him*, and why couldn't he have maintained better control of himself? If this went on, he'd soon be reading poetry to Minerva and kissing her feet . . . mmm, such a lovely idea. Perhaps tomorrow . . . ?

"That's fine, Severus, I understand. Just give it a good try," Minerva said briskly. "Shall I fetch Albus now? Would that be all right?"

Of course. Albus had been in the next room all that time. How much might he have heard? "Oh, gods." Severus leaned forward and moaned, holding Minerva's hand more tightly.

"Severus? Are you all right? I mean relatively speaking, of course."

"Yes." Severus sighed. "Just . . . what will Albus say?"

"I don't know, actually. I assume that he knows what spell hit you?" Severus nodded. "Well, given that he sent me out here to talk to you, I imagine that he will wonder whether we have come up with a solution that doesn't involve you locking yourself away in your rooms to die. Foolish idea! Since we have not, I suggest that we bring him out here and have him fetch us some books from the library, don't you?"

"Yes. But I can't stay here indefinitely. It's getting late."

"Mmm. We can have a bit of supper then, and I'll walk you back to your rooms after that, how does that sound? We can have Albus get you some Dreamless Sleep, as well, and I'll stay with you until you take it. Tomorrow's Saturday. When you wake up in the morning, you can come back up here my password is *Zinzibar*; you may let yourself in we can do our research, and you can, umm, express your affection at regular intervals. All right, Severus? Is that agreeable to you?"

"Yes. You are truly brilliant, Minerva. I do not know how I could have lived beside you for so long and not recognised how wonderful you are and how much you mean to

me."

Minerva rose, smiling kindly at Severus. "Those words are very sweet, Severus. Thank you." She reached out and gently caressed his cheek before turning and leaving the room to retrieve Albus.



Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22: *Snape is hit with a stray curse intended to make the victim openly express his love for his heart's true desire. The intended victim and other corresponding details are up to the author. When nothing immediately happens, both Snape and the spell's caster breathe a sigh of relief. But what happens when Snape later encounters his secret heart's desire and suddenly turns into a gushing, lovesick, romantic. How will the object of his affections react? How will Snape react when the spell finally wears off?*

Click the link to check out the other stories entered in the [Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge!](#)

Two: Researching Relief

Chapter 2 of 16

Severus suffers through a second day of the spell's effects as he continues to research a remedy with Minerva; he and Albus each have an unexpected encounter with Hermione Granger. A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Two: Researching Relief

Severus awoke with a start, bathed in sweat, heart pounding in terror. Gripping the sheet that had wound itself around him as he slept, he realised he was in his chambers at Hogwarts. The very next thing he remembered was Minerva standing by his bed the night before as he swallowed a draught of Dreamless Sleep. Minerva. Oh, gods, he had to see her. With that sense of urgency flooding him, the events of the previous day came rushing back.

He untangled himself from his sheets and reached for his wand. With a shaking hand, he lit the lamp on his bedside table. Sitting up and dangling his feet over the side of the bed, Severus realised it must still be quite early. Although his rooms were in the dungeons near Slytherin House, Dumbledore had long ago created a window for him that reflected a view out over the lake. It was still dark, with only a slight tinge of blue to the sky.

Dreamless Sleep, indeed! He may not have dreamt, but he had awoken with night terrors, and he clearly had not slept through the night. Trying to gather himself, he went into his bathroom and washed up, removing his nightshirt, splashing his face and chest, then dunking his head into a basin of cold water. He was now fully awake, but he thought he felt worse than when he first awoke.

Leaning forward, elbows on the edge of the sink, Severus held his head in his hands. The rational part of him knew he was merely suffering the effects of the *Adfectus* spell; that part of him struggled with his desire to fly from his rooms and find Minerva, regardless of his current state of undress. He looked up at the mirror, knowing what he would see there: sallowness, lank hair, sharp lines around his mouth and across his forehead. He had deep furrows between his eyebrows now, but none of the small laugh lines around his eyes like those that crinkled about Albus's. He looked far older than any of his former classmates, he thought, with the possible exception of Lupin. Of those who were still alive, anyway . . .

Severus sighed, almost sobbing. Wasn't his life difficult enough? There was no escape for him, no reprieve. It mattered not what he did, nor how much he attempted to atone for his previous mistakes—no, not mistakes. Not simply mistakes, although they had been that. He had done evil and continued to do evil, although supposedly in service to the Light. How could that be, to do evil and hope for good? Dumbledore always said that there were difficult choices that no human being should be forced to make—the choice between a lesser evil and a greater evil—and yet what mattered was the triumph of the good. Severus could see that even Albus was not altogether comfortable with this notion. Better to do no evil at all. Better to thwart every evil that one could. But Severus knew, with the instinct of a canny Slytherin and the despairing soul of a repentant Death Eater, that sometimes evil would triumph if sacrifices were not made. The sacrifice of the good for the greater good. Severus shook his head. "The greater good." He did not know what that was, only that it could not include Lord Voldemort's existence. And Severus knew that he would be one of the sacrifices; willing or unwilling, one way or the other, he would be sacrificed. He would sacrifice himself and, paradoxically, even his redemption, for this greater good that he did not comprehend and would never live to see.

Severus normally didn't engage in such introspection. It was of no practical use and certainly could make nothing easier for him. It was that damned curse Parkinson cast on him. It had affected his mind. Severus shook now, trembling as though from exertion. How was he to survive this? He had come to accept that he would be a sacrifice for the Order; he never considered he would expire from unrequited love. The thought was absurd. The Fates must be laughing at him now. He deserved to suffer as required to make restitution for his earlier, stupendously bad, choices. But this thing that afflicted him now, how did he come to deserve this?

Severus's knees grew weaker, and he sank to the cold floor. He *hadn't* deserved this accident of fate. And surely, neither had Minerva, sweet, lovely, darling Minerva. She had been very patient with him the previous evening. Albus had gone off to the Great Hall for dinner, leaving Minerva and Severus to eat supper in her quarters. Severus

found that he could sit with her quietly for a little more than an hour before the urge to act on his feelings began to overwhelm him. At her suggestion, he had confined himself to merely holding one of her hands in his and telling her of his love for her. She believed this would manage the spell better. Of course he had complied. He could do nothing *but* comply. He could not take anything from her even if the spell allowed it and it provided him with relief, he would not do anything to harm Minerva, and he would never do anything to her against her will. It was not merely the spell that made that thought repugnant. Even before the spell had hit him, Severus had a great deal of respect and although he never would have admitted it to anyone fondness for the older witch. He would rather die now than do anything to harm her.

Severus pulled himself back to his feet. He looked dreadful, more so than usual, he thought. Tamping down the urge to run naked through the corridors of Hogwarts in search of his love, Severus ran a lukewarm shower and washed himself more thoroughly than his customary ablutions at the sink, shampooing his hair twice. The thought that he was doing this out of love for Minerva helped him cope with the spell's imperative.

He dried himself and dressed mechanically. It was not yet five o'clock. She had given him the password to her rooms yesterday; she told him to come up when he awoke. Severus sat on the edge of his bed for five minutes, head in his hands, before he could bear it no longer. He had to return to her.

As he dashed through the long corridors and up the many flights of stairs that led to Minerva's chambers, Severus was glad for one of the objects that Albus had brought back with him the night before: Harry Potter's blasted map. He still didn't know precisely how it worked, but he knew of its existence. The very last thing he needed now was for the brat to look at the map and begin to wonder why his hated Defence teacher was spending all of his time with the Gryffindor Head of House. The boy and his cronies would begin to snoop, Granger would put two-and-two together and come up with four, as she always did, and the cat would be out of the bag. Of course, Granger had been circumspect about Lupin's "problem," but Lupin was a fellow Gryffindor and a beloved teacher. Severus doubted that he, on the other hand, could count on Granger's discretion about anything.

When Severus reached the fourth floor, he worried again about what Granger had seen and what she had deduced about the spell. It was not at all reassuring to him that Albus had found her in the Restricted Section of the library having skipped dinner, apparently surrounded by books related to the spell that had hit him. Albus had been in the library to find those very books when he had been attracted by the sounds of a hushed squabble coming from a remote nook. As Albus approached to investigate, Draco turned the corner, almost colliding with him. In keeping with his recent behaviour, Draco stammered a greeting and fairly ran past the Headmaster. Albus then peeked around the corner to find Granger sitting at a table, surrounded by dusty old tomes.

According to Albus, Granger had told Draco to get lost after the latter had tried to swipe some of the books that she had piled next to her. "I told him that we could share them, but he didn't want to be seen sitting with me, I guess . . . or else he was embarrassed."

"Why would Mr Malfoy be embarrassed, Miss Granger?"

Hermione hesitated. "I don't know . . . he's a Slytherin."

"Would you like to tell me what you are researching here?"

The girl reddened. "Nothing . . . well, not nothing, of course. A special project for . . . for Defence. Yes, for Professor Snape."

Albus sat down in the chair across from her and cast a privacy ward. "I understand that you were present earlier today when another student cast a spell that hit Professor Snape. Would this have anything to do with that?"

Hermione nodded, apparently relieved that the Headmaster already knew about the stray spell. "I told the boys Harry and Ron, that is that I had some Arithmancy homework. I didn't tell anyone about what happened, I promise, Professor. I'm pretty sure that Pansy and Millicent didn't, either it wouldn't reflect well on them. I was worried about Draco, but I think that, for some reason, he hasn't told anyone. Draco actually seemed concerned . . . Anyway, I wouldn't want any rumours to get about that Professor Snape was hit with that particular spell, but I was worried. I didn't know if he had told anyone, and I thought if he hadn't . . . well, maybe I could find something that might help."

"So you did hear what spell was cast?"

"Yes, sir did Professor Snape tell you which one it was? He did? Then did . . . no, it's none of my business, I suppose."

"I need you to tell me exactly what happened, Hermione. Better yet, I would like to view your memory of the event."

Hermione blanched. "Legilimency?" she asked in a whisper.

"No, my dear. We would use my Pensieve. I would not be privy to any of your own thoughts or feelings that way, and I would also be able to view an unbiased account of what happened see things that you may not have been aware of at the time."

"All right, Professor. If it will help Professor Snape. I've been worried about him even more so after reading something about the spell. I don't think it's possible to escape it . . . entirely unscathed. I know his work for you is very important." She left unsaid, "*and he would be vulnerable to Voldemort.*"

Albus shrank the books that Hermione had found, put them in his pockets, waved cheerily at Madam Pince, and led Hermione up to his office, where she extracted her memory and placed it in his Pensieve. Albus told Severus that he had viewed it several times before returning it to the girl.

"Didn't you believe me, Albus?" Severus had asked bitterly when the Headmaster related the tale, wondering whether this incident had destroyed the older wizard's trust in him.

"Oh, I did believe you. I was concerned that the event may have been staged, however that you had been the intended target of the spell all along."

Severus immediately understood what Albus was implying. If his brain hadn't been so addled by the spell, he would have seen it immediately. It was possible that Pansy and Draco and perhaps even Millicent had been engaged by another party to perpetrate the deed and make it look like an accident. Given his precarious position, Severus could see how someone either a rival or the Dark Lord himself might find this an amusing test of his loyalty.

"And what did you determine?" Severus asked with some alarm.

"I believe that it really was an accident or else it was one of the best staged ambushes in history. Do not worry unduly, my boy. We shall deal with it together, all of it. In this, at least, you are not alone. I would be more sanguine if I could question Miss Parkinson, but that would arouse too many suspicions, whether the event was an accident or not."

Severus had the sense that he should be much more concerned about whether Pansy had intentionally hit him with the spell, but the effect of the spell itself distracted him from those worries. And now, as he approached the seventh floor and Minerva's rooms, Severus felt a sense of panic. What if Minerva hadn't given him the correct password? Or supposing she had changed her mind about helping him and had changed the password after she had returned from his rooms the night before? He would go mad and then he would die; the reading they had done after supper had confirmed that.

Severus swallowed, his heart pounding in his throat, and whispered, *Zinzibar*." The door clicked and the portrait swung outward. He took hold of the door handle and felt a rush of relief as the door opened easily. He stood stock-still in the centre of Minerva's sitting room. The books that Albus had retrieved the night before stood in scattered piles, and a few parchments with notes and colourful lists lay on the table. Two pairs of glasses, Minerva's and Albus's, lay beside them. Severus felt tears rise in his eyes. But now the spell's imperative was too strong to permit him to do anything but what he had come to do.

His muscles feeling heavy and his limbs rigid, Severus stumbled to Minerva's bedroom door and leaned against it, cheek pressed to the cool oak. She was there, behind that door, breathing the air . . . he was breathing air that Minerva had breathed. That thought calmed him slightly, and he raised his hand and knocked. He heard a slight

rustle and a whisper, and just a second later the door opened. Once again, Severus fell forward into Minerva's arms. This time, he recovered himself and regained his footing.

He closed his eyes, savouring the feel of her arms supporting him, his own hands at her shoulders. Then, remembering their agreement that he would prolong the spell and his agony by limiting his expressions of affection to her. Severus opened his eyes and backed up. Dawn was providing a little grey light through the bedroom's open windows.

"I am sorry, Minerva. I tried to stay away longer. It . . . was a struggle," he admitted. Perhaps admitting his weaknesses to her would be one way that he could express his love.

"That's all right, Severus. I gave you the password so that you could use it."

As Minerva was speaking, Severus became aware that they were not alone. So focussed had he been on his love that he had not noticed that Albus was behind her. He had sat up and was now getting out of the bed that Minerva had clearly recently vacated herself.

Severus choked and turned his head away. He had no right to these emotions, none of them. Not his love of Minerva, not his desire to touch her, and certainly not the envy and jealousy that was now eviscerating him so thoroughly.

Minerva, realising what had triggered his spasm, took his arm, led him into the sitting room, and gently urged him to the sofa. He sat, torn by the emotions that gripped him.

"I am sorry, Minerva. I have no right. No right to anything. I know that. I just can't seem to help myself." He looked up at her where she stood beside him. "I think I would rather have been hit by the Killing Curse yesterday afternoon for many reasons, not the least of which is that you do not deserve to have this happen to you."

"We, on the other hand, are very glad that you were not hit by something deadly or any more debilitating than this spell." Minerva raised a hand, forestalling his protests. "It is somewhat debilitating, I know, Severus, and I know that it is . . . extremely difficult and uncomfortable for you. But we will manage it, I am sure."

Severus was aware that Albus had been standing in the doorway listening. What could he say to him? For this involved him, as well. Severus had not considered the fact that Albus might be there when he arrived at such an early hour, although had the spell not blinded him so thoroughly, he would have realised it was a possibility.

Albus cleared his throat. "I thought I would be gone before you arrived, Severus. I am sorry if my presence has made the situation more difficult for you."

Severus began to laugh, softly at first, then more loudly, almost hysterically. The other two simply waited. When his laughter began to die in choking sobs, he finally managed to force out a few words. "More difficult for me . . . that's rich, Albus, truly. Your presence " Severus gasped again, turning to look at Albus. "You are the one with a right to be here. Do not behave as though you are the interloper. Let us at least be honest about that in this entire ludicrous, absurd situation. If we are not, I will certainly go mad although I may just yet!"

Albus came closer. "I simply wanted to make things less uncomfortable for you, Severus. That is all I meant. I do not want to be a source of torment for you, my boy."

"Really, Albus? I will remember that you said that . . . I believe you mean it in the moment, but "

"No need to speak of other matters now, Severus. If you wish, I will qualify the statement for you: I do not wish to be an additional source of torment to you in this situation."

Severus snorted, but seemed to give up whatever argument he had been about to make. He leaned back against the settee, raised a hand, and offered it to Minerva, trying not to care that Albus was there the torment could go both ways, he thought, a lump in his throat, tears pricking the back of his eyes. Minerva took his hand, and he held hers, looking up at her face. Her hair had been gathered behind her head and charmed into a very loose sort of bun for sleep. Stray hairs framed her face beautifully, Severus thought. He raised her hand to his face, remembering not to kiss it, despite the almost overwhelming urge to kiss her hand, her wrist, her palm, her fingertips . . . He had never in his life been possessed of such a longing. Physical desire had always been about one thing only for him: relief in orgasm. Better achieved with the assistance of another, but if not, his own hand had always done an adequate job for him. This desire to touch another, to kiss and caress her tenderly, to bring her pleasure as he demonstrated his love . . . that was entirely alien to him. Was this something that others normally felt? Or was it entirely a product of the spell? Or was it something in between normal but amplified by the spell's imperative?

Severus gently pressed the back of Minerva's hand to his cheek. "You are a very fortunate man, indeed, Albus, to have found the love of such a witch. She surpasses all others in beauty and talent, in grace and wit, and in strength and loyalty. You have been blessed," he ended in a whisper. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against her hand. The urgency of the imperative drained from him. This would exhaust him, Severus thought. And he could not bear to feel the embarrassment and shame that accompanied the relief each time he expressed his love for Minerva. He would simply have to give in and endure it with as much dignity as he could muster under the circumstances. Severus released Minerva's hand and stood.

"Thank you, once again, Minerva." Turning slightly so that he was facing them both, he added, nodding, "I will no doubt be back in an hour or so. I am sorry to have disturbed you."

Minerva stopped him. "You needn't leave, Severus. We are up now, anyway. Why don't we all have breakfast together, then you and I can get back to our research while Albus tends to other business?"

Severus hesitated. Retreat to his dungeon rooms seemed very attractive right now, but the thought of having to make the journey back to her rooms again in an hour was less so. Eventually he would need to stay since he could not very well be seen going back and forth between the dungeons and the topmost level of the castle. He nodded his assent.

"Very good, Severus," Albus said. "As I told Minerva last night, her regular house-elf has been temporarily relieved of her duties, and Dobby will serve the two of you." At Severus's look of alarm, he added, "I have extracted his promise that he will not tell anyone about this, including Harry."

"A house-elf who promises anything? A free house-elf, at that? Albus, I do not think this is a good idea at all what about your own elf, what's her name, Whispy?"

"Wilsby; she will be helping us, as well, but I have her assisting with another task at the moment. Dobby will merely serve your meals, Severus. That is all."

"Only if he is called, Albus, please. The thought of that creature popping in while I'm . . . while I'm fawning over Minerva like a love-sick school boy . . . I just think it would be one blow too many." Severus sat heavily on the couch.

"Of course, my boy. I will make that quite clear to him."

Albus called Dobby, gave him explicit instructions, and the house-elf Disapparated with a loud pop. "I suggest that while we wait for breakfast, we review our research from last night and set up a plan for what our next steps will be."

Each of the three recounted what information they had discovered the night before Severus was surprised to realise that Albus and Minerva had apparently been up very late scouring the books for a solution to his problem. They probably had had no more than a few hours sleep. They discussed possible promising leads, and Albus and Minerva compared their notes. Severus gave a laconic recitation of various fates that befell other victims of the spell and what had happened to them when they were unable to fulfill its imperative. Some wizards and witches died in anguish and insanity, having ceased eating or sleeping; others were driven to suicide by their desperation drowning and poisoning being the two most common methods of dispatch. Both Albus and Minerva reassured Severus that simply because he hadn't yet found an example of someone who survived the spell without carrying through on its imperative, it didn't mean it hadn't happened. As Albus was speaking, Dobby reappeared, several platters of food floating above him. Albus cleared the table of its books and parchments, Dobby popped away, and the three sat down to breakfast.

Severus drank some coffee, but had difficulty eating anything. The clarity of thought that he experienced briefly before the spell's imperative set in once more was almost

as bad as the confusion, misery, and longing. This situation was intolerable. How was he going to face either of them after this? Providing, of course, that they actually found a remedy for the spell and he wasn't doomed to insanity and a slow, wretched death. And having Albus there at the table it was just too bizarre . . . He felt like a caricature of a ciccibee in a bad parody.

"Is the spell affecting your appetite, Severus?" Albus asked, his words punctuating Severus's thoughts on the absurdity of his situation. "Try some of the fruit."

"No, not really. I never eat much breakfast." He looked at the two of them, calmly sitting there eating their soft-boiled eggs and barley scones as though this were a perfectly normal morning. Letting his spoon fall with a loud clatter to his plate, he turned to Albus. "I do see it hasn't affected your appetite, though, Albus." He waited until he was sure that he had the wizard's undivided attention before he continued. "Don't you find this situation bizarre? Absurd? Or at least a little bit *odd*, Albus? How can you both sit there and eat like that?" Severus felt a pang of remorse that he had included Minerva in his last remark: she would need to maintain her strength in order to deal with him. Before he was able to apologise for his insensitivity, however, Albus spoke.

"Severus, what you are going through is most unfortunate and unfair and I am sure you are not where you would choose to be this morning, and you certainly are not here for any reason of your own choosing. From that perspective, I suppose this is absurd. However, right now we are eating breakfast together, nothing more, nothing less. We have shared meals before granted, under different, more congenial circumstances, and not quite so early in the morning but I do wish that you would try to extract what normalcy you may out of your day. I know that is difficult for you in the best of times, my boy, but it would make it easier on both you and on Minerva if you could try."

Severus's clarity of thought was beginning to wane, but it seemed that what Albus said made sense. He certainly didn't want to be more of a burden to Minerva than necessary. He would try, for her sake. Somehow, despite their sense, Severus still resented Albus's words, and so he did not respond, except to pick up his spoon and begin eating the berries and cream that Minerva had just fixed for him and set at his place. He smiled despite himself: Minerva herself had spooned the berries into a bowl and then ladled the cream over them. That alone was reason to eat them. Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through him. *He* should have fixed *her* a bowl of berries. He should have poured her tea. He knew precisely how she liked it after so many years of watching her prepare it. He should be serving her, not allowing her to wait upon him.

Severus dropped his spoon again. Tears welled up in his eyes. Once more, the small, detached part of him that maintained some sense of rationality watched, scornful, as he wept over his breakfast. How could this be? The man who had joined the Death Eaters, then betrayed them and rejoined as a spy, how could he be crying into his berry bowl?

He was vaguely aware of Albus leaving the table. Then he heard Minerva's voice, her burr softly trilling the r's in his name, "Severus, Severus. Come now, look at me. I am sorry if Albus seemed less than understanding of your predicament. He does take it seriously, you know."

Severus looked up at her; she was so kind. The very definition of kindness. And justice. She would always be fair, yet moved by gentle mercy and compassion, as well. Gulping back a few tears, he said, "No, it wasn't that, really. Please don't concern yourself. It was . . . something else."

"What was it then, Severus? You may tell me, if you wish."

"It was just " He gulped back another sob; oh, how he wished he had avoided crying in front of her! "You fixed me the bowl of berries . . ." His voice broke and he couldn't continue.

"Yes is there something wrong with them? Would you prefer something else?"

"No, no, please." He took a deep breath and let out a shuddering sigh. "I don't want you to go to any trouble for me. I should have fixed your bowl, made your tea, made sure you had everything you needed . . . I wish I could serve you, Minerva, my " He stopped himself with great effort. He could not continue to gush like this. He would have no shred of dignity left before the day was over; he might as well lock himself away in his rooms to die right now.

He stood abruptly, almost overturning his chair, then turned from her and walked toward the door, as if to leave. But now he could not. The imperative was growing strong again. He slumped onto Minerva's small settee.

"May I sit beside you a moment, Severus?"

He nodded. He could not have said "no" to her. Remembering her words yesterday, he bit his tongue before he asked if she still believed he wasn't pathetic.

"Here, it's been over an hour. No wonder you're feeling a bit on edge."

Severus reached over and, with a questioning glance at Minerva, took her hand. He held it in both of his, then raised it to his mouth and kissed it, a true kiss, not a mere courtly gesture. He kissed it again, then let out a deep sigh as relief began to flow over him. "I am most fortunate that, as Albus said yesterday, I have good taste in women," he said with the faintest smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Almost every other woman of my acquaintance would have tossed me out on my ear long ago or, at the very least, be having a good laugh at my expense and if you are, I would prefer not to know!"

"No, Severus. There may be some humorous aspects to this situation, which we may find together later, once it's all over, and there may be times that you make me smile, but I certainly am not laughing at you." Then, more briskly, she said, "Are you feeling better, Severus? If you are, I think we should begin our research. And we don't want to diminish the effects too quickly, remember."

Although he was, indeed, feeling better, Severus was reluctant to let go of Minerva's hand. The urgency had abated, but the spell's imperative would have been quite satisfied to have him continue to hold her hand, kiss it, caress it . . . With a shudder, Severus released Minerva's hand.

"Yes, thank you, Minerva." As they rose and Minerva banished the breakfast dishes, he remembered his original purpose in coming here the day before. "You know, even before the spell took full effect, I was coming to see you for help because I knew that I could trust you. I knew you would help me and do so in a . . . tolerable fashion." He helped Minerva move some of the books and parchments back onto the table. "I know that yesterday I said I didn't believe we were friends, Minerva. But that is a fiction I have lived by in order to survive my life, such as it is. I suppose the trust I place in you . . . perhaps that shows that we are friends and that, on some level, I knew it already."

Minerva smiled at him. "Well, then, that's at least one good thing that we can count on having come out of this otherwise regrettable incident! I doubt you would have ever said anything like that to me before and I do hope that it's not just the spell speaking."

"No, Minerva, it's not." He smiled somewhat ruefully. "If it were, I am sure it would have been phrased in much more flowery and absolute terms. But you are correct; I would not admit such a thing if I were in my right mind."

After they had decided which book Severus might be able to read and make sense of in his current state, Minerva left to shower and dress. Severus assiduously tried not to think of what details those activities might involve, which became easier once Albus reentered the room, dressed and looking freshly groomed.

"I thought I'd stay a little while and give you a hand, if you don't mind, Severus. I will make an appearance in the Great Hall this morning, but breakfast won't be served for a couple of hours yet."

The two wizards worked together in silence for a while, until Albus said, "Severus, may I speak to you for a moment? If you're feeling up to it . . ."

"Yes, Albus; I'm still relatively lucid, if that's what you're asking."

"I think you should come to lunch in the Great Hall today." Before Severus could protest, Albus continued, "It would not seem odd to anyone if you didn't appear for breakfast on a Saturday morning, or even if you were to miss one or two meals, but it would not do to seem to disappear completely over the weekend. I think that you

should attend every meal possible until you feel utterly unable to do so. If you . . . see Minerva for a few minutes just before you leave for lunch, then return to her immediately, you should be fine. Do you think you can manage that?"

Severus agreed; he could just imagine what Draco and Pansy were making of his absence from dinner the night before. Perhaps that had inspired Draco's visit to the library and his unsuccessful attempt to commandeer the books Granger had found. "Perhaps I should even go to breakfast. Just a brief appearance. I could drink a cup of coffee, look like my usual unpleasant self, and leave. Forestall any speculation on the part of certain Slytherins and one Gryffindor."

Two hours later, Severus Flooded from Minerva's sitting room to the Headmaster's office, where Albus had kindly waited for him while he "recharged," as Severus had begun to euphemistically call the moments during which he allowed himself to act in response to the spell. Before they left to walk down to the Great Hall, Severus stopped Albus, gently placing a hand on Albus's right elbow, mindful of the other wizard's injury.

"Albus, I am not very good at this, as you know, but I want to thank you. And to apologise." Severus paused, unsure of what to say next. "There have been times when I have resented my debt to you, when gratitude seemed to me just one more form of abasement. I always rationalised my resentment by remembering what you were getting in return." Seeing that Albus was listening to him quite seriously, not twinkling at all or seeming ready to interrupt, Severus continued, "I know that you may have your reasons for helping me now. Reasons involving the Order. But I think . . . I think that you are not doing this just to help Snape the spy . . . are you?" He immediately regretted asking that question.

"Severus, you can answer your own question. Try to imagine this same scenario, but replace yourself with another Order member. I am not saying that I would allow someone else to die from this spell, of course, but I will honestly say that I cannot imagine being as . . . at ease as I am now with you. The reasons are complex, but I can tell you that what I said yesterday about caring about you is a large part of it. And I trust you. You are an honourable man at heart, Severus. And if Riddle were to die fully and finally while we ate our breakfast this morning and your services were no longer needed, you and I and Minerva would nonetheless proceed as we have done and undertake whatever is necessary to free you from this spell."

Severus released Albus's arm. "It's probably an effect of the spell, Albus, but I believe you. Although I do believe that *Minerva* might prefer if it were someone else or is that a part of the 'complex reasons'? You don't want her with some other, more attractive wizard?"

Albus chuckled. "Oh, Severus, I trust Minerva even more than I trust you. More than anyone, in fact. And as to her personal taste . . . she chose to be with me, and she has remained with me for decades. You could look like Gilderoy Lockhart, and it wouldn't make a difference to me. In fact, I am glad that she is fond of you. If you were someone whom she disliked or had difficulty tolerating . . . well, her decisions in this situation are her own, but I would be unhappy if she felt she had to endure such a person's attentions. But come, we need to have breakfast and return you to Minerva before the spell overtakes you again."

Fifteen minutes after he had arrived in the Great Hall, Severus strode out, glaring balefully at no one in particular. He restrained himself from running back to his quarters, and when two Slytherins tried to stop him to talk to him about something, he snarled at them and told them that whatever it was, it would have to wait until tomorrow. Closing his door behind him, Severus doubted there would be a tomorrow for him. He lit a small fire then grabbed a pinch of Floo-Powder from the mantle; his hand shook as he threw it into the grate. His knees buckling as he stumbled into the Headmaster's office, Severus wondered if he would make it through the Floo to Minerva's rooms without fainting, but there she was, waiting for him, the very image of a goddess.

She took his hand and said briskly, "Come, now, Severus, you're late." Without another word, she dragged him bodily into the Headmaster's private suite.

"I thought it best not to be too . . . effusive in front of the portraits," she explained as Severus fell to his knees in front of her, taking both her hands in his and kissing them.

"Oh, Minerva. You are truly the most deserving of all women! You have once again saved me. Your perspicacity and foresight are surpassed only by your loveliness and femininity!" Severus shuddered and dropped her hands.

Remembering that he was going to try to endure the spell with at least some dignity, Severus shook off any feelings of shame and embarrassment and stood. He breathed heavily for a moment, then said, "Thank you, Minerva. I underestimated how long it would take me to return to your rooms from my own using the Headmaster's Floo."

"I will ask Albus to connect my Floo to yours, then."

They spent the rest of the afternoon in Minerva's rooms, researching the *Adfectus* with which Severus had been hit, as well as any of its variants. Albus dropped by twice to see whether they had made any progress and to bring a few books from his own library. All that Severus read increased his despair. He saw no way out of his situation.

The books he had been assigned to read all held anecdotal accounts of witches and wizards who had been afflicted by the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus* and similar spells. There were no instances that he could find where a witch or wizard had been hit by that particular spell and had found a third way out one that didn't involve either death or, as Minerva had so quaintly put it the day before, the "ultimate expression" of their feelings. He made a note of the few instances in which a counter-measure had been effective for other similar spells, just in case Albus or Minerva were able to see a way in which it might be useful.

He and Minerva had attended lunch and dinner together, arriving and leaving separately, and he had sat beside her both times. He managed to fend off the imperative a bit longer than usual by discreetly filling her glass, retrieving her napkin when it fell to the floor, and other such gestures. He maintained his customary scowl throughout dinner, and so he hoped that no one noticed he was more solicitous toward the Deputy Headmistress than usual. It quite surprised him after dinner when Hermione Granger appeared at his elbow as he was leaving the Great Hall. He was torn between annoyance and fear.

There was no one within earshot that he could tell, but he had not been a spy all those years for nothing he would say nothing to her that would give him away, even if she blathered on about the *Adfectus* at the top of her voice for the next five minutes. Of course, if she did that, he might hex her . . .

"Professor Snape?"

"What is it, Miss Granger, that makes you feel entitled to accost people as they leave dinner?" He began to stride rapidly toward the dungeons, Hermione trotting along beside him, undeterred.

"I have my extra credit project for you, Professor. And the reference work that I used to draw my conclusions," she said, panting.

Extra credit project? Albus said last night that she had referred to her research as a "special project" for Defence. Severus stopped and grabbed at the book and parchment that she was holding out to him. "Since you did not have this for me yesterday," he said, "I do not see why I should accept it now. But I am in a generous mood, Miss Granger."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Professor. I remembered the order when I used the charm, as well," Hermione said enigmatically.

Not knowing how to respond to that bit of nonsense, Severus said, "I have your work, now, Miss Granger. That will be all unless you care to accompany me to Slytherin?" he added in his most dangerous voice.

As soon as she had scurried off, Severus took the most direct route to his rooms rather than his usual, more circuitous one, which allowed him to catch miscreants in various corners of the dungeons. He Flooded directly to Minerva's sitting room and was grateful that she was already there. After the now tedious but curative recitation of Minerva's virtues and a few small gestures of affection, Severus told Minerva of his encounter with Hermione.

They looked at the book. It seemed to be a standard textbook on defensive spells. There was a folded parchment containing a rather dull essay, in Hermione's handwriting, recounting the various ways one could kill a vampire. It certainly was not sixth-year material, nor was it up to Hermione's usual standard. Severus was about to try some standard revealing charms on the parchment when Minerva chuckled as she ran her hands over the book. "Tell me, Severus, everything that Hermione said to you when she gave you this."

Long practice of regurgitating conversations for Albus made this easy for him, despite the deleterious effects of the spell.

"*I remembered the order when I used the charm,*" Minerva muttered. "I think it is quite simple, Severus. I hope that it is keyed to the password alone and we do not need to know which spell she used." Minerva raised her wand, opened her mouth, then stopped. "Perhaps you would prefer to do it?"

"No, no, please proceed."

"*Phoenix.*"

The book shimmered a moment. It was now an arcane text on spells used to control or influence others. Minerva pointed her wand at the parchment and repeated the procedure.

"*Dear Professor Snape:*

"I hope you are well and that you will forgive my impertinence. I was going to give this book to Professor Dumbledore after lunch, but could not find him, so I decided to give it to you, instead.

"I overlooked this text yesterday evening when doing my research. It may not be useful, but in case it holds any valuable information at all, I thought I should pass it on. The section that I found most relevant begins on page 114.

"I do hope that you have no need of this book, but in the event that you do, I hope that you have someone helping you. From what I read yesterday, the spell can affect cognition and judgment.

"I am sorry that I was unable to stop the argument before things got out of hand. I hope that you have come to no harm.

"Sincerely,

"Hermione Granger"

Minerva teared up as she read Hermione's letter. "That was very kind of her, Severus. Even you must admit that."

"I *must* admit nothing, Minerva," Severus replied with a shadow of his usual sneer. "However, *will* admit whatever you wish."

"You know, Severus, what bothers me most about that spell?"

"My constant presence? My repeated professions of love? My blandiloquence? My sweaty palms?"

"No, the fact that you do not argue with me about anything. You aren't even particularly . . . sarcastic anymore, except about yourself and your own situation."

"I'm sorry, Minerva. I could try, of course. But I'm afraid that, aside from the fact that I do not wish to hurt your feelings, the spell has, as Miss Granger pointed out, affected my cognitive abilities. I do not think that I could do our usual arguments justice." He raised an eyebrow and gave her a half-smile.

Minerva reached out and patted his arm, smiling gently. "That's all right, Severus. It will be something to look forward to." She looked at him seriously. "I hope that you are looking forward to it, as well."

"Yes, of course. I want to be rid of this damned spell."

"What I meant was, I hope we are still friends after this. That you will not feel beholden and turn your back on me because of it. Don't look at me like that, Severus. I know you too well."

Severus just shook his head and sat down on the sofa with the book Hermione had given him. "I am sorry, Minerva. I am so influenced by this spell right now, I do not know how to reply to you. I know what you are saying, of course. I have not lost my memory nor my mind, entirely but emotionally, I find it difficult to connect what is happening now with anything else in my life before this. I do not know what will happen or how I will feel if we are able to counter the *Adfectus*."

"*If,* Severus?"

"Yes. I will not get my hopes up, despite the Headmaster's optimism."

Minerva made no comment to that, but settled down across from him with her own research. She was startled when Severus suddenly threw the book at the door. He put his head in his hands.

"What is it? Is it that bad?"

"I can't understand a thing. It's too theoretical. I read four or five words and then I forget what I've read. I can't make sense of an entire sentence. How am I supposed to teach like this?" he asked, raising his head to look at her. "And it will only get worse."

"We will worry about that when the time comes. You have been teaching a long time, Severus. You can just avoid any theoretical discussions or have the students answer any questions themselves, and if their answers don't sound right, have them write an essay on it." Minerva went over and picked up the book Hermione had given Severus and placed it on top of the stack she was reading.

"Hmpf. And who will correct those essays as I slowly descend into madness? Albus seems quite adamant about not bringing in another teacher."

"You know why that is, Severus. It would get back to Vol er, You-Know-Who. He would summon you, and I am sure you could imagine better than I what would happen then."

Severus found the book he had begun reading before lunch and flipped through it to find his place. The two sat in harmonious silence for the next few hours, reading and taking notes, interrupted only by Severus's regularly scheduled professions of love and adoration for Minerva.

At ten-thirty, Minerva removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes and stretched in her chair.

"Tired, Minerva?" Severus asked. "You have been up since five. You should get some rest. I would not want you to exhaust yourself for me."

Minerva smiled at him. "Just a bit tired, Severus. We need to think about you, though. I cannot go to bed until you are safely asleep. Would you like to Floo to your rooms now? Albus gave me another dose of Dreamless Sleep for you."

Severus hesitated. "I am afraid to sleep, Minerva," he whispered, swallowing his pride. "It is foolish, but I fear that I will wake up in terror again, and it will be too late I will not realise soon enough that I need to see you, and then I will just lie there in my bed and go mad."

"I understand, Severus." Minerva thought a moment. "There's a nursery charm I know. I could cast it on you after you have gone to sleep and then, as soon as you awaken, I will be alerted. I could come to you, then. How would that be?"

Normally, the idea of anyone putting him to bed would have infuriated Severus, let alone the notion of having a nursery spell placed on him, but Severus nodded, his natural reluctance losing the battle to his common sense and the spell's imperative. "That would work." He looked over at Minerva again. "You are tired, though. We should call it a day, I think."

"Albus said that he would come by again, so I must wait up for him, anyway. If you wish to stay, I am sure that he will want to see you. He shouldn't be much longer."

"Very well." Severus watched Minerva as she put her glasses back on and picked up her book again. "You needn't do any more work, though. Couldn't we just sit and talk a while, my darling Minerva?" He cringed slightly as the affectionate appellation slipped from his lips. "And I was wondering whether you had found anything that might be helpful."

Minerva set down her book and hesitated. "Just a few small things, Severus, nothing definitive. I will show Albus and see if he thinks they are of use to us. But I haven't given up hope, Severus. There are still more texts to read." She smiled at him.

"Minerva, my sweetest Minerva, I am coming to accept my fate. Those who fight the spell seem to be the ones who suffer the most in the end, but I will fight it for as long as I can, if that is your wish."

"Come, Severus, the spell is speaking again! Please do not talk as though we will allow you to suffer and die!"

Severus rose and went over to Minerva. He knelt before her, took her hand, and kissed it gently. "There is a potion, then, when it becomes too unbearable . . . if you could ask Albus to brew it. I do not think I could at this point. It will allow me to end it all before complete madness and physical deterioration sets in. I would take it gladly from your hand, Minerva." He lay his forehead on her knee.

"Severus, please do not speak of such things. I cannot bear the thought that is one choice I refuse to make!"

Severus looked up to see Minerva's distressed features. "I am sorry, Minerva. I will be brave for you, then. And I will have Albus shut me away where you needn't see me at the end . . . when it is bad."

"I will not abandon you, Severus Snape! For the first time in years, I feel like slapping you, but in your present state, I doubt it would do you any good."

"I'm so sorry, Minerva." His breath hitched and his eyes filled with tears. "I do not know what to do." He buried his head in her lap.

Minerva stroked his head. "There, there, Severus. I am here, and Albus is helping. We will be fine, both of us."

Severus pulled away and stood, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. Minerva handed him a handkerchief. "I am sorry, Minerva . . . You know," he said with a slight laugh, "I think I have apologised more in the last two days than I have in the last twenty years. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Minerva just shook her head and smothered a yawn. "I'm sorry, myself, Severus . . . I am afraid I'm not as young as I used to be. There was a time when I could have worked all night long."

A whoosh from Minerva's fireplace alerted them to Albus's arrival. In his arms were several scrolls, and as he stepped into the sitting room, one fell and rolled toward Severus. He bent and picked it up.

"Scrolls, Albus? Are these merely unpublished manuscripts, or are they as old as they appear to be?"

"They are rather old, actually "

"But we determined that the first recorded use of the *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus* was in fourteen sixty-two if these are older than that, I don't see their usefulness."

"You know that wizards and witches have been using similar spells for many centuries; in fact, there are earlier examples in these scrolls of *Actus Affectus* spells just not targeted at *Amor Verissimus*. They were loyalty spells, tests for treason, for the most part, but also a few that had no specific targeted emotion but were designed simply to force an individual to act in accordance with every one of his emotions you are very lucky, as are we all, that you were not struck by such a spell. They did, however, have the advantage of being time-limited. I thought that if we could discover the difference between those time-limited spells and the *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus*, we might be able to effect a remedy. I had hoped to join you and do that this evening after dinner, but was unable to there was a slight problem in Hufflepuff House, after which I checked on Wilsby's work for us and consulted with Madam Pomfrey."

Severus's interest in Albus's research turned to alarm as Albus mentioned the school matron. "No, Albus! You didn't tell her, did you?" He sank to the sofa, his stomach churning at the thought of Madam Pomfrey's involvement.

"No, I didn't tell her about your situation. I had a task for her, however. She can be of help, Severus, without knowing any specifics. I will explain further in the morning, if you don't mind. Right now, I must confess to being a little tired."

Severus agreed, remembering that he had awoken not only Minerva at such an early hour that morning. Minerva explained to Albus their plan for the nursery charm, which Albus agreed was a good idea.

"And how are you faring, my boy?" Albus asked after Minerva had left to "freshen up."

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. Minerva has been very patient. Much more so, I am afraid, than I would have been had our roles been reversed."

"We do not know that, Severus "

"And we never will, or could," Severus interrupted, "since clearly the spell would have affected her in quite a different way. She never would have come to my rooms seeking me. We both know that, Albus."

"True. I will not lie to you or humour you, my boy. That would be adding insult to injury. But I do think that had she been afflicted by something different, but which nonetheless required your presence and attention, you would not have denied her, even ignorant of your feelings as you had been until yesterday."

"You have too good an opinion of me, Headmaster," Severus sighed. "Although I hope that you are correct in this instance."

"And, if you will forgive my asking, how far have you been required to extend your affectionate gestures toward Minerva?"

"Not far, Albus. You needn't worry about that. I do think that the interval has decreased somewhat, however."

"I am not worried for the reasons you may think, Severus. I am simply attempting to judge the progression of the spell's imperative."

Severus snorted. "Well, I have still confined myself to holding her hands and kissing them. Speaking to her of my feelings and my . . . my admiration for her seems to increase the effectiveness of the other gestures. Further physical contact, if initiated by me, also seems to help. I " Severus clenched his jaw before continuing, steeling himself against the shame and embarrassment of his confession. "I knelt and . . . and laid my head in her lap. That seemed to give greater relief."

"Good, Severus. Now, I would prefer to keep the interval longer rather than having it decrease, so experiment with other expressions of your feelings toward her. See if you can't keep the interval to at least an hour, although a bit longer would be better. Also, you looked rather . . . grey when you arrived this morning. I think it best that there is as little delay as possible between your awakening and your seeing Minerva. I will tell her that myself, so that she will arrive in your rooms as quickly as she can

tomorrow. The charm she proposes sounds ideal, for the moment."

"For the moment?"

"I think you will agree you cannot take Dreamless Sleep indefinitely, although there are other sleeping potions we may try. The time may come, my boy, when even being able to Floo to each other's rooms will not be sufficient."

Severus said nothing. His clouded mind was unable to produce arguments against Albus's suppositions and predictions, but he could also recognise the futility of fighting the truth of what Albus said. "What of my classes, Albus?"

"I believe I have a solution of sorts, at least something that will get us through a day or two. But I'd rather wait until tomorrow to discuss the details."

Severus nodded in agreement, and Minerva reentered the room.

"What details, Albus?" she asked.

"Just a few plans I would like to propose for the coming days, but I'd prefer to wait until we've all had some rest before I present them to you, my dear," he answered, smiling at Minerva.

"All right, then. I am too tired to consider any proposals right now, anyway. Are you ready to go, Severus?"

The two Flooed through to his rooms, and she waited while he brushed his teeth and put on his nightshirt. He sat on the edge of the bed, and Minerva explained to him that she would cast the nursery charm after he had fallen asleep and that it would only awaken her if he woke up completely. "The advantage to the particular charm I am using, Severus, is that it does not rely on sound you needn't call for me to come. So even if you are very confused and remain completely silent after you awaken, I will still know to come for you."

Severus told Minerva of Albus's wish that they keep the interval longer, and hesitatingly suggested that they begin that night before he went to sleep. "Perhaps I will not wake up feeling quite so wretched in the morning," he added.

"Of course, Severus. That sounds . . . reasonable to me." She smiled and took his hand. He had given up protesting that she must find him dreadful, tedious, and pathetic, so he accepted her hand and raised it to his lips.

He kissed the back of her hand a few times before moving to kiss her wrist, then turned her hand to nuzzle her palm and kiss it before speaking. "I did not choose this spell to strike me, Minerva, and I did not choose you to be my true love, yet I see that it could be none other but you. In the universe of women, you are the only one deserving of my full and unqualified love, although surely my love is but a puny trifle compared to your own great worth." He sighed and kissed her palm again a few more times before releasing it.

"That was lovely, Severus. Thank you." Minerva patted his shoulder. "Now, time for your draught. And have no fear; I will come to you when you awaken."

The last thing Severus saw before he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep was Minerva's gently smiling face.

Three: A Difficult Discussion

Chapter 3 of 16

The spell's imperative grows stronger for Severus as his urge to act on it increases. Albus and Minerva discuss the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*, its consequences, and the possibility of a remedy. A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Three: Difficult Discussions

When she returned to her rooms, Minerva found Albus still in her sitting room, dozing in a tall wingback chair. She slipped off her shoes, then quietly crossed over to him and removed his glasses. He looked up and smiled at her.

"You didn't need to wait up for me, Albus," Minerva chided gently.

"I wanted to see you before you retired, my dear."

"Before I retired? I know I must stay in my own room tonight with the situation as it is, but do you really have to go back to the Headmaster's suite?" She gently caressed his face then traced his lips with one finger.

He caught her finger up in his mouth and sucked its tip before taking her hand in his and kissing it. "I don't need to stay there, but it is probably wise. You saw how Severus reacted this morning."

"But I will be going to him tomorrow. Please stay. You are the one who said we should extract as much normalcy as possible out of this situation." Albus seemed to be considering what she had said. "And I should feel quite abandoned, I promise you."

"Mmm. Well, we can't have that, can we? Come here." He tugged her hand, and she settled on his lap, snuggling against him and kissing his cheek.

"Oh, yes, now, this is much better," she breathed, her words tickling his ear before she nipped his earlobe and licked it lightly, then leaned back to look at his face. She smiled to see him flush.

Albus caressed her cheek and neck, pausing only slightly before continuing on down to gently stroke her breast through her robes, flicking his thumb where he knew her nipple was. He watched the progress of his caress and whispered, "This is the only time that I ever completely regret my injury. I miss being able to touch you properly with both hands. To have that pleasure myself and to bring you pleasure, as well."

Minerva stopped his words with a gentle kiss to his lips, first full on his mouth, then proceeding to his lower lip, kissing, licking, and suckling it as she knew he liked. She moved even closer to him, rhythmically pressing her thigh against his erection, and reached beneath his beard to begin unfastening his robes, beginning with the top-most button. Albus returned the favour, pushing her teaching robe off her shoulders, then tugging the lacing at the back of the emerald green robe she wore beneath it, loosening it enough so that he could encourage it down around Minerva's waist; Minerva withdrew from her caresses long enough to pull her arms from the sleeves. Albus kissed her deeply before drawing back to look at her again. A whispered spell, and her camisole's small mother-of-pearl buttons were undone. She shrugged it off, and it fell to the floor behind her.

Minerva leaned forward again, brushing her nipples against his beard; cradling the back of his head in her right hand, she began to kiss him again, slowly and sensually, then urged his tongue into her mouth. With her left hand, she continued to open Albus's robes, reaching in occasionally to stroke and tease his skin, drawing circles around his nipples with her fingernails. When Albus reached between them and took hold of her breast, fondling its nipple, Minerva moaned into his mouth and quickly finished unbuttoning his robes, shifting her weight slightly so that she could access his erection with her hand. It was his turn to groan.

Albus pulled away from their kiss and rested his head on her shoulder, gently kissing her neck and collarbone. "Minerva, perhaps we should stop." He kissed her shoulder then nipped it lightly, his actions belying his words.

Minerva stopped stroking his erection, but maintaining her hold on it as she leaned back. "Stop? You want to stop? You never want to stop, Albus," she said huskily. "Even that time in the staff room when there was a meeting in ten minutes, you didn't want to stop . . ."

"There was a ward on the door, my dear." He kissed her cheek gently and caressed her from her breast to her hip.

She returned his kiss, moving back to his lips, and she brushed her thumb across the head of his cock, spreading his moisture over it. "Mmm, but you didn't want to stop, even though someone may have been waiting right outside the door, able to hear . . ." She pulled back again, looking at him. "Why, Albus? . . . Does it bother you that Severus has been here all day? He has not touched me in any way that he couldn't in public not that he would, of course."

"No, it's not that, although it is because of the current situation." He reached down and disengaged Minerva's hand, which had begun to gently stroke and tease him again. He lifted her hand and kissed it.

"It's not at all the same when he kisses my hand, Albus, as when you do, truly."

"I know, my love." He put an arm around her and drew her close; she rested her head on his shoulder.

"What is it then?"

"Are you sure that he is asleep? The Dreamless Sleep I gave you for him today was a stronger dose, but he woke very early this morning."

"I saw him take it, Albus. He was asleep within seconds. Besides, I would be aware of it if he woke up I cast the nursery charm, remember? We are in no danger of having him Floo through at the moment."

Albus sighed. "It's not only that, though, my dear. You and I need to talk. And I was quite serious this morning when I told Severus that I did not want to be an additional source of torment to him in this situation."

"He won't know. How could he know, unless one of us said something? He may guess, but I doubt very much that he would ask about it. He does have some manners and in this situation, even if courtesy didn't keep him from asking, his own desire not to have to think about me making love with you would keep him from it."

"Still, it might also make it more difficult for you, my dear."

Minerva looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You know that his gestures of affection will need to increase in intensity, even in nature, as time passes. Won't it be more difficult for you to accept them if we are still being intimate?"

"No! I don't particularly want to think about it at the moment, Albus, but I can honestly say that if you were to turn away from me now, it would make it more difficult for me, not less. It is easier to be patient and generous with Severus when I know that you are waiting for me, that I can return to your arms." Minerva leaned forward and kissed him, then tried to resume her previous ministrations, but Albus stayed her hand.

"We do need to talk about it, though, Minerva." He looked at her seriously. "I will not leave you tonight and," he said, smiling, "I look forward to resuming our previous activities, but I think that we should talk first. And I think we would both find it easier if we covered up a bit I would be less distracted, my dear!"

"After the thousands of times you have seen me, Albus, I wouldn't think that the sight of me could still distract you."

"Always, Minerva, always," he whispered, kissing her softly.

Minerva stood and allowed her robes to fall to the floor around her. Albus looked at her, pupils dilating darkly.

"Well, I wouldn't want to distract you, Albus. I'll just nip into the bedroom and put something on." Minerva walked toward the bedroom door, quite naked but for her stockings and a rather spare set of lacy knickers. She turned to Albus and smiled, looking him up and down. "I do see what you mean, though, about distraction. Perhaps you might tuck away your own rather distracting . . . attraction for me while I'm gone, hmm?" She licked her lip with the tip of her tongue before turning again and leaving the room.

Albus looked down. His erection was protruding from beneath his beard, indicating quite magnificently how attractive he still found Minerva after all these years. When she returned from the bedroom a moment later, a dressing gown wrapped around her, he had moved to the sofa, removed his shoes, and partially buttoned his robe to keep himself modestly covered for the moment.

Albus patted the sofa beside him, and Minerva sat down and began to lean against him. "No, my dear, we need to speak quite seriously, and I think we can do that better if we are looking at each other."

Minerva straightened. "All right, Albus. What is it you wish to say?"

He took her right hand in his left and squeezed it. "You know even more about the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus* tonight than you did last night. Is your assessment of the situation similar to mine? What do you think of the chances of finding a counter-spell to it?"

"I haven't given up hope, yet, Albus. It does seem to me that the few leads that I thought I had found will not prove helpful, after all. But you brought those scrolls; perhaps the answer lies in one of them."

"And what have you told Severus?"

"That I had found some promising leads. That there was hope, especially with you helping us."

Albus looked pensive. "I do not believe that we should give up, and we should certainly continue to be optimistic for Severus's sake for as long as possible, but I am not at all sanguine that we will find any spell or potion that will counter the effect of the *Adfectus*. I believe that we will find that the reason the other *Adfectus* spells were time-limited, yet *Amor Verissimus* is not, has to do with the nature of *Amor Verissimus* and little to do with the *Actus Adfectus* portion of the spell." Albus sighed.

"And for us that means . . . ?"

"From the research I was able to fit in today, it seems as though one can theoretically, at least have more than one 'true love' in one's life and that, in the case of this spell, 'true love' refers not to a unique love, but to one that is of a lasting, abiding nature. Even if Severus were to go on and find another love, perhaps even another 'true love,' his love for you would never leave him. I believe that is why the spell does not wear off by itself. The kinds of emotions that the other *Adfectus* spells are aimed at are, for the most part, of a more ephemeral, fleeting nature such as jealousy, desire, lust, hatred, anger, and loyalty and although loyalty and hatred can come very close to having the same lasting quality, even the greatest loyalty and the strongest hatred can wane or be eclipsed in a way that true love cannot. Because of this difference, I do not believe that inquiry into those spells will be of as much help as I had originally hoped."

"But you said to Severus "

"I know what I said, Minerva. I did not believe it advisable to explain it to him in such detail. There is still the possibility that I am wrong, or that there is other material in the scrolls that will be helpful, but in his current state, he would only hear my doubt, not my hope. He will fare much better as long as he believes that we are optimistic, my dear."

Minerva nodded slowly. "Yes, I see that." She shook her head, remembering the conversation she had with Severus before Albus returned. "He spoke of suicide tonight, Albus."

"What? Do you think he will "

"He promised me that he wouldn't. He had been going on about the end stages of this . . . curse. But when I told him that we would not allow him to suffer, he asked me to have you prepare a potion and that he would take it from my hand . . . It was quite disturbing to hear him speak like that, Albus."

Albus was silent a moment, looking down at her hand in his own. "I've had to extract the same promise from him before, but as you might imagine, I left room for some exceptional circumstances, given the work that Severus does for the Order. I do not approve of suicide, but if death is inevitable, and one has a choice in how one may die . . . there are circumstances in which our choices are limited, you understand, Minerva."

"Naturally I understand that, but I will not help him to commit suicide because some fool girl hit him with a spell she had no business casting in the first place. It ~~is~~ not an option," Minerva said firmly.

"Then you understand what the only other option may be, my dear?" Albus asked, looking directly into her eyes.

She sighed. "Of course I do, Albus. I have not discussed it with Severus, although I have emphasised that we would not allow him to die, that we would find a way out. I have not spoken of that particular way out, however. I have not wanted to think about it, myself."

"You should think about it, though, Minerva. You need to confront it, even more so than Severus does. You have some time to get used to the idea . . . to become comfortable with it."

"Comfortable with it? I do not see how I can ever become 'comfortable' with the idea, Albus. Resigned, if necessary . . . I could kill Pansy Parkinson right now." Minerva's eyes were hard with anger toward the girl.

Ignoring Minerva's stated desire to kill one of her students, Albus continued, "I would prefer . . . no, my own preferences are unimportant. I would hope that you are able to become comfortable with the idea and with the reality of it, as well, for your sake as well as for Severus's."

Minerva was quiet for a moment. "I do not know if I can be. And I do not understand your attitude. Of course we cannot let him die, but you seem . . . almost as though you do not care, Albus."

"Oh, I do care, very much, Minerva, my love." He sighed. "How to explain this to you? I am not giving you my blessing to have an affair. The thought that you might have an affair with some other man would never even occur to me now." At her raised eyebrow, he added, "It has been a *very* long time since I might have considered that you might want to be with another man, Minerva. I am quite secure in our relationship. I am sure you know that. And if everything I believed about the strength of our bond were false, and you were to have an affair, even just a single tryst, with another man, I would be quite devastated. But my belief in you, in us, runs so deep, it rises to more than mere belief. I know you, Minerva, and I know what our relationship means to you. I have complete and perfect faith in you, my love."

"As well you should, Albus," Minerva replied softly. "But I still do not understand . . ."

"It is not for me to request that you do anything with respect to Severus in this situation. It is not even my place to give you permission. Do you understand? It is your choice how you approach this, but if you do not wish Severus to die, and we are unable to find a third option, your choices are somewhat limited."

"I know that, Albus. Do we really need to discuss this? It's distressing enough to consider it in the abstract . . ."

"Yes, we must. Although it is not my place to give you my permission, I want you to know that, if you require it of me, you have my permission to do whatever it is that circumstances bring you to do. And it is also not my place to make any requests of you, either, but I would like to express the hope that you will . . . take what good you can of it."

"What do you mean? I am glad for your . . . permission . . . to do what must be done. It does make me feel a little more comfortable, I suppose. But the other you cannot mean that I should encourage him or something?"

"No, although he may need some encouragement; I do not know. What I mean to say, my love, is that you should try to . . . take pleasure in it, to whatever extent you are able . . . to enjoy yourself, if that's possible." Squeezing her hand, he stopped her protest. "Hush, now, Minerva. I say this not because I relish the thought of you . . . well, you know, but because I cannot bear the thought of you merely enduring it. That, to me, is much worse. I would rather believe that it was something other than a repugnant necessity to you. As I said, whatever you do in this situation is your choice. I would not stop you from doing whatever you decided you had to do, even if it were only out of a sense of duty to save Severus's life and you found it entirely revolting. And obviously I cannot dictate your feelings about it, but I would like you to know that I would rather have you enjoy yourself, as far as that is possible in such circumstances, than to know that you are submitting to something that disgusts you. Can you understand that, my love?"

Minerva nodded slowly. "Yes. I do see what you mean. Both from your perspective and just as a matter of what choices I do have in this situation. I could not live with myself if I allowed Severus to die if I could prevent it by allowing him . . . But I had never considered that I might have some choice other than simple rejection or submission. I have tried to make him comfortable with his expressions of affection, such as they are at the moment. And occasionally he is really rather sweet in some of the things he says, although I know that the spell is responsible for it. I suppose it would be easier on him if I were to . . . not appear to loathe his touch when it came time."

"Yes, it would be. Both at the time and later. He will not forget what has happened once the spell releases him, you know. How well both of you are able to deal with it will depend a lot on the attitude you present to him. I would like . . . " Albus hesitated.

"What would you like, Albus?"

"It is, as I have said, up to you how you deal with him, but given the circumstances . . . it would not be a bad thing . . . if Severus could feel something of what it means to

be loved." His voice broke, and Minerva was surprised to see tears fill Albus's eyes.

"What is it, Albus? Tell me, please." She didn't imagine he was merely overwhelmed by sentimentality.

"It's . . . you know there are things that I am unable to tell you. And I do not even know myself . . . It may be that I will need to send Severus into even deeper cover, my dear, though I do not wish to. We are seeking a way around it, but in this instance, I am afraid that Severus is more hopeful than I am that we will find another course." He blinked, and Minerva reached out to brush away the few tears that trailed down his cheeks.

"He will have to leave the school, you mean, and spend all of his time as a Death Eater?"

Albus closed his eyes and sighed. "I ought not have even told you that much. And it may not come to pass."

"I wondered why you had given him the Defence position. I always thought he asked for it every year in order to satisfy certain expectations of him, not because he really wanted it. Although I do think he is going to do well in it. But he won't last more than a year, either, will he?"

"The position is still cursed, I am sure. But I do not think we should be discussing this. At least not right now, Minerva. And I do not ask you to do something for him out of pity, and I actually don't want to feel as though I am asking you to do *anything* for him. But if you could bear in mind Severus's position and his nature . . ."

"Of course, Albus, always. It has been on my mind since he first fell through my doorway. This has been very hard for him. It goes against the entire persona that he has built for himself."

"I think, then, that we two shall try to make this easier for him, are we agreed on that?" Minerva nodded in response, and Albus continued, "And I will do whatever it takes to make this easier for you, as well, my love. I have made some arrangements, which I will tell you both about tomorrow, that I hope will help, if you agree to them."

"All right, Albus. It is getting very late; you can tell me tomorrow when you tell Severus."

"You do know, my dear, that I love you beyond all reason, don't you? And I believe in you utterly." He smiled and kissed her cheek.

"I know, Albus," she whispered, leaning in to embrace him. "And you are my very life. My very life."

A few hours later, the two woke to an extremely loud rendition of a Bach Toccata and Fugue in D minor for organ. Minerva scrambled for her wand, thankful when the music stopped as soon as her hand touched it.

Albus was sitting bolt upright in bed. "My God, Minerva, you could have warned me!"

Minerva lit the bedside lamp. "Sorry, Albus. I just used the same charm Melina used when her children were small. She's a very heavy sleeper. I didn't think to change it."

She grabbed her tartan dressing gown and slipped her feet into her slippers. As she shuffled toward the sitting room, she said. "I'll probably be back soon, Albus. You just go on to sleep."

"If my adrenaline level will allow me to," Albus grumbled, dousing the light and rolling over.

Minerva Flooded to Severus's quarters and used a simple Lumos to light her way across his sitting room to his bedroom door, barking her shins on a pile of books only once. She knocked lightly on the door before opening it. She could barely make out Severus's form curled up on his bed. Waving her wand, Minerva lit the candles in the sconce next to the door.

Severus was curled into a ball, sheet twisted about his legs, a pillow clutched to his chest. He looked up at her and blinked. "Minerva. I waited for you, Minerva." His words came out in a low whimper, as though he were in physical pain.

Minerva rushed to the bedside. "I'm here, Severus, I came." It hadn't been more than a couple of minutes between the alarm and her arrival. Had the charm malfunctioned? Had he been awake a long while? "I got here as quickly as I could, Severus," she said as she sat beside him.

"I know. I knew you would. But I dreamed, Minerva. It was dreadful." He reached out and took the hand she offered him.

Minerva was startled. Albus had said that the Dreamless Sleep Potion was stronger, yet here it was, not yet three o'clock in the morning, and Severus said he had dreamed. "What did you dream, Severus?" she asked gently.

"I'm not sure." He let out a great sigh and kissed her hand. "I think I was trapped. I was trapped and trying to wake up, but I couldn't. It wasn't really a dream, I think, just . . . terror."

"I think we should see what other sleeping potion we might try, then. I think it would be preferable to actually dream and be able to wake up from it, don't you?"

"Mmm." Severus kissed her palm. "You are always so wise, my sweet Minerva, just as a goddess should be."

"Severus, are you fully awake?"

He looked at her. Minerva's forearm had replaced the pillow that he had clutched to his chest earlier. "Yes, I think so."

She sighed. "Do you suppose I might have my arm back, then?"

Severus let her go and pushed himself back away from where she sat at the edge of his bed. Being so entangled in his sheets made that difficult. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Don't be, Severus, please. I don't mean to be cross with you." Remembering Albus's words of the night before, she reached over and smoothed his hair back from his face. "You know, it is lovely to hear you say some of the things you do, Severus. But although I may seem like a goddess to you, I am just an old witch who is a bit short on sleep."

"You aren't so old, Minerva. You are in your prime." The imperative having been soothed for the moment, Severus was able to stop himself from waxing lyrical about Minerva's many virtues, although he would have liked to continue.

"Perhaps. But I am still short on sleep, Severus. Do you think you will be able to fall asleep again if I leave you?"

"I will try, Minerva."

She recognised his tone. "I didn't ask you if you would try, Severus, I asked you if you would be able to."

"I don't know," he answered soberly. "Perhaps. But if I did, I'd likely wake up in an hour or so, needing to . . . see you again."

Minerva sighed. "Will you be all right for a few minutes by yourself?"

"Of course," he answered, wishing she hadn't needed to ask.

"I need to go see Albus about this, but I will be back, do not worry."

"I know you'll be back if you say you will be, Minerva." He swallowed hard. "It's terrible to trust someone. Almost as terrible as trusting no one. I am sorry I am putting you through all this. Albus, too."

"Don't even think about it, Severus. Here, now, give my hand another kiss, hmm? Good. I'll be back soon."

She left Severus's bedroom and Flooed back to her own rooms. She really was too old for this. And poor Albus. He opened his eyes when she entered the bedroom and lit the bedside lamp again. "How was he?"

"Not well, I believe." Minerva told Albus of the state she had found Severus in and how he described the terror of feeling trapped and unable to wake up.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"A few minutes before three, now. He woke up about fifteen minutes ago."

"I had hoped he would be able to take Dreamless Sleep at least one more night, but I think not." He considered for a moment. "And you don't believe he'll fall asleep again?"

"You know as well as I that Severus is something of an insomniac even under normal conditions. Even if he were to doze, I have no doubt that he will wake up again in an hour less than that, now and need to see me again. Despite that, and despite Severus's opinion that I am in my prime don't laugh, Albus! I do need some sleep. I really don't want to stay down in the dungeons with him, Albus."

"All right, have him come up here again, then. We can Transfigure the sofa into something a bit more accommodating for him . . . then he can just come in whenever he has the need to see you. It's not ideal, but at least you'll get a little sleep. I will Transfigure the sofa for you before I leave."

"Please don't leave, Albus. He knows you're here, anyway. I'm not ready for you to leave. Please?"

"All right, love. But I had better put on a nightshirt or perhaps pyjamas and it would not be amiss if you donned a nightgown before you went to fetch him. And do warn him that I'm here, will you?"

Minerva pulled on a sleeveless, tartan cotton nightgown that buttoned to the neck, then put her dressing gown back on over it. "I hope that we find a solution soon, Albus. This is exhausting."

Minerva Flooed back to find that Severus was not in bed. There was water running in the bathroom. She sighed. She felt as though she could fall asleep standing up. Knocking on the bathroom door, she called out, "Severus? All right in there?" There was a muffled reply and some splashing. Minerva sat down in the chair next to his wardrobe. Despite his condition, Severus had very carefully placed his shoes next to the chair before he went to bed the night before, ready for the next day. Rather like a little boy, Minerva thought. She leaned her head against the side of the wardrobe and fell into a light sleep, waking with a start when the bathroom door opened.

"I thought I'd take my shower now. I didn't realise you would be back so soon." He was wearing a heavy, navy blue terry cloth robe. "Um, I suppose I should get dressed."

"Why don't you just put on a fresh nightshirt for now, Severus. I thought you could come back up and nap on my sofa during the intervals. Just bring a set of robes with you for the morning and whatever else you think you may need."

Severus hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"It's preferable to my having to Floo down here every hour for the next three or four hours, Severus. This way, you could just come in and wake me when you need me, all right?"

"If you don't mind . . ."

"What I *mind* is that fool Parkinson getting only a week's detention with Filch. I'm of a mind to make her clean the Owlery on her hands and knees, at least . . . Yes, I will find Filch in the morning and tell him. Come on, Severus, let's go." Seeing Severus's face crumple before he turned away from her and busied himself at his dresser drawer, Minerva softened. "As I said, I am very happy to help you, but I do get cranky when I am short on sleep, Severus. I hope you will forgive me if I am less than patient at the moment."

Severus turned, and Minerva could see that tears had welled up in his eyes. "Please don't apologise! I don't know what's wrong with me, Minerva well, obviously, it's the spell but I am insulted and denigrated all of the time; I'm used to it. And now you are justifiably impatient," Severus sniffled a bit, "and no more sharp with me than usual, and I turn into a snivelling baby."

"Hush, Severus, don't concern yourself. It's perfectly all right." Minerva went over to him and awkwardly patted him on the arm. "I'll wait for you in the other room, hmm?" At Severus's nod, she went out to his sitting room and stood next to the fireplace, leaning against the mantle. She feared if she sat down, she would fall asleep again. She and Albus probably should not have stayed up so late . . . but she had needed him.

A few minutes later, the two of them had Flooed back to Minerva's rooms, where Albus was waiting for them, sitting in the wing chair and smoking a long pipe. Minerva shook her head slightly when she saw the pipe, but didn't say anything. When a wizard's over one hundred fifty, it seemed rather pointless. And it was an occasional treat for him, not a real habit. She hadn't even been aware that he smoked a pipe until she had known him more than twenty years. Severus obviously hadn't been aware of it at all, for he stood and stared.

"I'm sorry, my boy, I thought you knew I was here. Didn't you tell him, Minerva?"

"I forgot. I do have a few things on my mind, you know," Minerva retorted.

"What? No, it's not that you're here, Albus. I thought you might be. It's . . ." He stared, mouth agape.

"What?" Albus looked down at what he was wearing. Perfectly respectable, conservative red pinstripe pyjamas and a red dressing gown.

"You . . . you . . . you smoke?"

"No. Well, obviously, yes. But only a pipe. Occasionally." He looked over at Minerva. "Very occasionally. And usually not in Minerva's rooms. But I will do a nice freshening charm, my dear, I promise," he said, looking over at Minerva, who was plumping the pillows on the bed that Albus had Transfigured from her settee.

"Don't worry about it, although Severus might prefer it if you did . . . You know that my objection has nothing to do with the smell of the tobacco, which I actually don't mind."

Albus twinkled and turned to Severus, "We have had the same conversation at least once a year for the last . . . what? Thirty-five years?"

"At least," grumbled Minerva. "If I finally admit you win, will you put it away for now?"

"Yes, my dear." With an odd twist to his left hand, which held the pipe, Albus banished it to who-knew-where; another wave of his hand, and the smoke dissipated, although the aroma lingered. "Will that do?"

Minerva gave him a crooked smile. "That's fine. Thank you."

Albus turned again to Severus. "Now, my boy, Minerva has asked me to stay. And I, too, need my sleep. Will you be all right out here if I stay with Minerva, or would you prefer that I Transfigure another bed out here for myself and stay with you?"

Minerva opened and closed her mouth. She didn't want Albus camped out in her sitting room; he might as well Floo to his own quarters. But these were unusual circumstances, she recognised, so she said nothing.

"Um, it's okay. If Minerva would like you to stay." Severus looked over at Minerva. "She doesn't need a chaperone, Albus. I think she knows that. So if she wants you to stay . . . she doesn't want you to stay out here with me," Severus finished, blushing.

"I wasn't implying that she needed a chaperone, Severus; you were here all day yesterday, after all. But I am glad you are understanding about this. Now, Minerva, you look dead on your feet! Off to bed with you!" Albus took Minerva's arm, led her into the bedroom, and shut the door behind them. As soon as the door closed, he enfolded her in his arms, gingerly resting his blackened right hand on her lower back and holding her tightly with his left arm. He kissed her forehead. "I am sorry, my dear. It's just such a difficult situation . . . I thought I should offer to stay with Severus."

"It's all right, love, let's just try to get a little rest before Severus comes knocking . . . which will probably be in about ten minutes," Minerva said with a sigh.

They crawled back into bed and drifted into a light sleep. Minerva lay on her side, one hand resting on Albus's chest. If Severus walked in on them, she didn't particularly want him to see them in a more intimate position. Sure enough, fifteen minutes after getting into bed, Minerva was woken by a light rapping on the door.

"Come in, Severus."

As Severus opened the door and entered, Minerva rolled over to face him. Albus, though no doubt awake, remain still and quiet on the other side of the bed. The light from the sitting room outlined Severus's silhouette.

"Come closer, Severus; it's all right. I would rather not get up, if you don't mind terribly," she said softly.

Severus stepped tentatively across to the bed and looked down at her, her face illuminated by the light from the doorway. He whispered, "I tried to wait twenty minutes, but . . . I had to see you, Minerva. You look so lovely there, your hair spread upon your pillow." He knelt beside the bed and took her hand in his, kissing it softly, then kissing the inside of her wrist. He closed his eyes and sighed before looking up at her. She smiled at him and brushed his hair back with her free hand. Feeling that she might not mind, he kissed the inside of her wrist once more, and then again. He closed his eyes and nuzzled her wrist and arm. When she made no move to pull her arm away, he gently kissed the soft skin of her forearm, then rubbed his cheek against it, glad that he had shaved. The imperative was satisfied for the moment, and the urgency had drained from him, but it was so pleasant to kneel beside her and kiss her soft, sweet skin. He kissed her wrist again and waited for her to pull her hand away as she always did. Perhaps she hadn't objected because she had fallen asleep, he thought, and looked up at her. But Minerva's eyes were open, and there was a slight smile on her face.

She gently removed her hand from his clasp and touched his cheek briefly. "Come in again when you need to, Severus. I'll just take a little nap now, all right?"

Severus nodded and stood, wishing he could lean over and kiss her . . . just one small kiss on her cheek, if she would permit it. A part of him recognised that the effect of the spell was becoming stronger, that even when the urgency had faded, his desire for Minerva remained much more immediate than it had. He felt a rush of gratitude toward Minerva for her patience and forbearance. He smiled despite himself. His gratitude was totally unmixed with resentment. He resented his situation, but not Minerva, and nothing that she had done, either. "Thank you, Minerva. You cannot know how much this means to me," he whispered.

He looked over at the other side of the bed, where he could just make out Albus's form in the shadows. Leaving Minerva was painful, and it was hard to know that he would be outside the room while Albus was able to lay beside her. Severus swallowed, turned, and left the room, closing the door behind him with a gentle click.

Minerva turned back toward Albus and put her arm around him. "You are an extraordinary man, have I ever told you that?" she whispered.

He rolled onto his back and put his arm around her, pulling her closer so her head lay on his chest. "Mmm, perhaps once or twice . . . not nearly often enough," he teased and kissed the top of her head.

"How's your hand?"

"It could be better. I really shouldn't lie on my right side for so long without moving, but I didn't want Severus to feel any more self-conscious than he already must."

"Foolish man," Minerva said, turning her head and kissing his chest. "Next time, just lie on your back and keep your eyes closed. He knows you're there, anyway."

"Hmm. We'll see. Let's sleep a bit more . . ."

Albus and Minerva were able to sleep another hour and a half before there was a soft rap at the door. Albus didn't awaken until Minerva disengaged herself from his embrace and called out for Severus to enter.

Severus was trembling as he sank to the floor beside the bed and desperately clutched Minerva's hand. Once he had satisfied the imperative sufficiently to stop shaking, he slumped against the side of the bed.

"Severus, you waited too long, didn't you?"

"I wanted you to sleep, my love. I kept thinking that if I allowed you to sleep, that would demonstrate my love for you sufficiently to keep the spell at bay," he whispered. "It wasn't too bad until the last fifteen minutes."

"How long did you wait?"

"An hour and a half."

"Severus, you are almost as much of a fool as the man lying beside me."

He looked up at her, raising his head from where it rested against her arm. "I believe that coming from you, those are words of affection, Minerva." One corner of his mouth twitched in a smile.

"I shouldn't have said that, though, Severus. It was insensitive. I am sorry. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but please don't make yourself ill just so that I can get another ten or fifteen minutes sleep, all right?"

"But Albus "

"She's right, Severus." Albus ceased pretending to sleep. "I would also prefer to be woken up than to have you make yourself ill. It could become quite dangerous."

Severus looked down and nodded before he got up to leave. "It's quarter past five now. I think I should be able to go until six-thirty quite safely."

After the door had clicked shut behind him, Albus turned to Minerva. "Minerva, it would be lovely if we could actually get a little more sleep."

"I'm sorry, Albus. If you would like to go back to your own room, you can. I should have thought of that part of it."

"That wasn't what I was going to suggest." He raised himself up on his elbow and looked down at her. "This bed is quite large. We could make it even larger, if need be."

Minerva just looked at him a moment, her eyes widened. "You can't possibly be suggesting . . . Albus, that's just . . . "

"All I am proposing, my dear, is that you and I sleep and Severus stay in the room with us. On the bed next to you. It will be easier for him to act on the imperative just as he has been doing, my dear, nothing more as soon as he needs to; he would only have to waken you very briefly, you wouldn't need to wake up as much, and I might even be able to sleep through it, although that is not the primary reason I am making the suggestion."

"Well, I just don't think I can go out there and invite him to come join us in bed, Albus. It sounds too . . . suggestive!"

"Mmm, I suppose. But don't worry, I have absolutely no desire to do anything other than sleep while he is in the same bed with us. And Severus has behaved himself quite well; I don't think he will attempt to do any more than you would allow him to do anyway."

Minerva sighed. "All right. It would be nice to sleep . . . We might even be able to sleep a little late. It is Sunday. But you go out there and tell him, Albus. It's your idea."

Albus obligingly rolled out of bed, picked up his wand, and added another two feet of space to Minerva's side. He then padded to the door and went out to the sitting room to talk to Severus. Minerva rolled over and closed her eyes. She really was too old for any of this. Albus seemed to be dealing with it all much better than she was . . . and better than she would have thought he could. He had a flexibility of mind that was a rarity in anyone, let alone someone of his age. Sleeping with two men, though . . . That was not something that Minerva McGonagall had ever believed she would do, even if all they were doing was sleeping and one of them was Albus.

From what she could hear, Severus was no more pleased with the notion than she had been. Minerva chuckled. Likely less than she, actually. Imperative or no imperative, Severus was not particularly flexible, she thought, and he no doubt found Albus's idea quite distasteful.

Albus returned. "He doesn't believe me, my dear. Could you let him know it's all right with you. He believes you would be dreadfully offended."

Minerva sat up in bed. She could see Severus sitting on the Transfigured bed in the sitting room, head in his hands. "Severus, come here a moment, will you, please? Albus, leave us alone for a minute."

Severus obeyed. A part of him thought he should be at least a little reluctant to follow her orders, but he didn't pay any attention to it. Albus closed the door behind him, and the two were alone.

"Come here and sit beside me, Severus." Minerva remembered what Albus had said the night before. After he sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, the imperative not so strong at the moment to make him forget himself entirely, Minerva reached out and took his hand. Watching his face carefully, she raised it to her lips and kissed it. His hand smelled cleanly of almond soap. Severus's eyes widened, and Minerva saw his Adam's apple move up and down as he swallowed rapidly.

"Severus, you have been a gentleman throughout this ordeal. You have acquitted yourself nobly. I am very proud of you." She waited for his reaction, but he just sat there speechless. "I know that you will never do anything to me that I do not allow, and I have confidence that you will continue to behave as a gentleman. You have said that you wish to allow me to sleep longer. I think if you stay with us, I would sleep better. If you are uncomfortable doing so, you don't have to stay. But I would be uncomfortable at the moment asking Albus to leave; can you understand that?"

Severus nodded. "I suppose we can try it, Minerva. I do feel better when I'm with you, even if I'm just sitting with you. Are you sure it's really all right with Albus, though?"

"It was his idea, so I presume it is. Will you fetch him now, Severus? And then when you come back with him, you can lie down next to me."

The three of them settled down together, Severus lying on top of the covers next Minerva, a tartan afghan draped over him. Minerva didn't think she would be able to sleep with him lying there stiff as a board beside her, but sometime later she became aware of a hand gently stroking her face, Severus's voice calling her name, and she realised she must have slept. She opened her eyes to see Severus's face hovering above her.

"Minerva, my sweet, how lovely you are when you sleep, all waking cares fled and nought but pure beauty to be seen in your countenance!"

Minerva blinked. Her life had taken some strange turns, but this had to one of the strangest. She pulled her arm from beneath the covers and offered Severus her hand. He looked at it reverentially before raising it to his lips and kissing it. Unsatisfied, he began to slowly trail feather-light kisses up her inner arm. His kisses tickled, and Minerva fought her desire to pull her arm away. Albus had said that it was more important to keep the interval longer than it was to minimise the extent of Severus's gestures of affection. And now that she was aware that they truly might not find a remedy to the spell before Severus went entirely mad with unexpressed love for her, Minerva realised that the manifestations of Severus's love would only become stronger with time; she might as well face the inevitable. She relaxed back into her pillows and, through half-closed eyes, watched Severus's slow progress up her arm. Despite herself, his kisses had ceased to simply tickle and had begun to elicit a slight tingle that spread through her.

She flushed, unsure whether in reaction to Severus's attentions or in embarrassment; she was keenly aware that Albus lay on the other side of her, apparently still sleeping peacefully. When Severus's kisses reached the inside of her elbow, which he apparently found particularly delectable, as he had paused to kiss it several times, Minerva felt he had gone quite far enough for the moment. She reached out with her other hand and caressed his cheek, gently urging him from his current preoccupation.

He raised his head and looked at her, eyes glazed.

"That's fine, Severus. How are you feeling now?" Minerva kept her voice low, not knowing whether Albus was awake or not.

He blinked twice and sat back away from her. "Better. Much better, thank you, Minerva." Letting go of her hand, he looked down at the object of his former attentions. "I did not mean to take such liberties, Minerva," he whispered. "I am sorry."

"Shh, it's all right," she whispered back. "As long as you feel better. And it was quite nice, what you said. I've always been told I drool and snore when I sleep, so it was pleasant to hear otherwise!" She smiled at him and patted his arm. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Almost seven o'clock."

"Seven? That's late did you let it go too long, Severus? Did you make yourself ill?"

"No, it was easier . . . once I got used to lying here with you. I . . . " Severus lowered his eyes. "I could relax, watch you sleep, and . . . well, I did place my hand on you just on your arm, with the blanket between us." He looked up again to gauge her reaction.

"That's all right, Severus. It was an excellent decision on your part. I feel somewhat more rested, although I may still need a nap this afternoon."

Severus lay back down beside her. "Shall I wake you in an hour or so, then?"

"Yes, that's fine. I think I could fall back to sleep, actually."

Minerva woke only a short time later, it seemed, again aware that Severus was speaking to her and caressing her cheek. The second thing she became aware of was that Albus was not beside her. She opened her eyes. Severus was still lying next to her, his fingers softly stroking her hair.

"You are the most wonderful woman in the world, Minerva," were the first words she understood him to say.

"Thank you, Severus, but where is Albus?"

Severus withdrew his hand and Minerva thought he winced slightly. "He got up about ten minutes ago. He's in the shower, I think."

Minerva was going to have a few things to say to Albus about this the next time they had a moment in private. She would come to terms with whatever she had to, but she had not been prepared to wake up alone with Severus next to her even if he weren't actually in the bed. No point taking it out on Severus, though.

"Do you know the time?"

Severus sat up. "Just a little past eight o'clock, my love, my darling, my dearest . . ." Severus shut his eyes tightly and clenched his jaw, then took a deep breath and opened his eyes again. "Would you like to get up and have breakfast soon?"

"I think that's a good idea. I believe that Albus may want us to go to breakfast in the Great Hall, but we should probably assess your current state, first."

Severus just nodded. He appeared to be holding his breath. Minerva sighed. Time for another "dose of Minerva," apparently. She sat up in bed and rested her back against the headboard, glad that the nightgown came up to her neck, even if it did leave her arms exposed. Looking at Severus sitting there stoically waiting for her, it came to Minerva that, no matter how difficult this was for her, it was far worse for Severus, probably in ways she couldn't imagine.

She held out her arms to him. "Come here, Severus." When he just looked at her as though he didn't know what she meant, she repeated, "Come here to me," and reached out a hand to touch his arm and pull him toward her slightly.

More tentatively than he had done anything else up to that point, Severus shifted toward her, and as she reached out her other hand to pull him closer, he scooped closer to the head of the bed. Minerva gently urged him to lie back with her, putting one arm around him and pulling his head down to rest on her shoulder. "Now, speak to me, Severus, and touch me as you wish."

A shudder passed through Severus, and he turned his face into her shoulder. He moved his arm as though to return her embrace then dropped it. "Minerva, I do not deserve this," he choked.

She could feel his tears, damp through her nightgown. "Shh, shh, Severus, I am here for you. Shh, shh, shh. I know you don't deserve to suffer this way, but I am here."

He raised a tear-stained face. "No, Minerva, any suffering is only my just desserts; it is you I do not deserve: your kindness, your patience, your attention . . ."

"Of course you do, Severus! Why do you think that?"

"I am evil, Minerva. My soul is black. You are goodness and light."

"Severus, I am not in any position to judge the state of your soul, but in my opinion, you would not be in such distress about it if you really were as evil and irredeemable as you seem to think. And although I appreciate what you say about me, I am not perfect. We are both trying, Severus. We are both trying." She wiped away a few tears from his cheeks. "And you love me; I believe if you were truly evil, you could not. Now come, Severus, demonstrate your love to me," she said softly.

He sighed deeply and closed his eyes, resting his head back against her. One hand reached out to trace the line of her arm from her shoulder to her wrist. "You are more wonderful than you know, Minerva. Your kindness and friendship to me through all these years has sustained me as much as you have sustained me through this curse. I can do nothing other than to love you, to love you always, my sweetest Minerva." Severus tilted his head and kissed her neck. "So soft, so lovely," he murmured before kissing her throat and caressing her cheek. "So wonderful," he breathed against her as his kisses moved up to her jaw. "So sweet, so, so sweet."

Minerva felt gooseflesh come over her. She considered suppressing her physiological reflexes and moderating her physical response, but with an inaudible sigh, she recognised it would likely only make things more difficult for her in the end while doing nothing to help Severus. Her eyes half-closed, she consciously relaxed and moved her head to allow Severus easier access to her neck. As his kisses feathered along her jaw and moved up to her ear, Minerva's feelings warred within her. She wanted to cry; not since she and Albus had finally come together had she allowed another man such an intimate touch, and she never dreamed that she would again, even if Albus were to die. But at the same time, there was something sweet and touching in Severus's kisses and murmured endearments, and although Minerva knew that if it weren't for the spell, he never would have expressed his feelings for her or perhaps even have recognised them she knew they were genuine. From what Albus had said last night, and from her own observations of his life, she doubted that he had ever expressed such feelings to anyone else before. He may never have even received such love from anyone. Although she would not have chosen to have Severus hit by the *Adfectus Amor* and be forced to express his love for her, Minerva thought that, since Severus was constrained to act on his feelings, she should at least value his gestures of affection.

Despite that decision, Minerva did not want to exhaust the possibilities for relatively chaste expressions of his love, so she raised her hand and gently disengaged him from his attentions to her neck and ear just as he was murmuring again, "So sweet, so, so sweet."

"You are quite sweet, yourself, Severus," she said with a smile.

He flushed and pulled away from her. "I couldn't help myself, Minerva. You should stop me."

"I did. Now I think I would like to see if Albus is done in the shower and take one myself. Why don't you go make yourself at home in the sitting room for a while. You can get dressed if you like. You know where the small loo is, if you need to use it."

After Severus had left, Minerva stretched gratefully and got out of bed. Without bothering with her slippers or dressing gown, she made a bee-line for the bathroom. Albus was still in the shower, humming under his breath. He must have cast an Imperturbable on the bathroom door. Closing it behind her, Minerva quickly stripped off her nightgown and stepped toward the shower. Albus hadn't noticed her yet, and when she opened the glass shower door and stepped in to join him, he turned and smiled, but raised his eyebrows.

"What are you doing here, my dear?"

"It's my bathroom and my shower, so you might gather that I am here to take a shower." She reached up and smoothed her palms across his shoulders and down his chest, around his beard. As she reached his stomach, she stepped nearer and said, "But you would be only partially correct." She licked a nipple as her hands continued their downward progress, one stopping to grasp his swiftly hardening cock, the other continuing down to cup his balls.

"Mmm, Minerva. Please don't." Albus gently took hold of her upper arm with his left hand, but did not push her away. "Minerva," he whispered, "you have me at a disadvantage."

"Mmm. Good." She moved to his other nipple as one hand stroked his cock in long, fluid movements, her fingers tightening around him slightly as she pulled her hand up over its blooming head and then back down to meet her other hand as it alternately caressed and cupped his balls.

Albus stepped back, Minerva followed. He leaned against the tile wall, head thrown back. "Oh, gods, Minerva. You should stop." His hand moved from her arm to her right breast, cupping it then stroking upwards, brushing over her erect nipple. He pushed her away, but only to access her left breast with his mouth. She arched against him, pressing her body against his erection and grasping his slippery torso. She gasped.

"Albus, Albus, I need you so. Please, my love." She looked down as his tongue flicked her nipple before he caught it between his lips and suckled. He moved to her other breast and supported her with his left arm. She leaned back, trusting her weight to his grasp and relishing the sensation of his cock pressed against her belly as she watched him lick and suckle and gently nip her breast.

He pushed her against the opposite shower wall and began to lick and kiss his way down her body. Minerva grasped the towel bar on her left and kneaded his shoulder with her other hand. She moaned and spread her legs as Albus nudged his left hand between her thighs. He was on his knees before her now, rhythmically thrusting his fingers into her, looking up to see her reaction as the shower streamed over his face and down his beard. He grinned and cast a nonverbal spell, pleased with her expression of surprise as she Levitated above his head.

Using his tongue, he parted her lips and found her darkly swollen clitoris. His fingers still moving in her vagina, he began to flick his tongue back and forth, up and down, and was rewarded when Minerva arched, trembling, gasping, and clutching at his hair. Albus continued to flick and lick and suck, relishing Minerva's abandoned passion.

She gripped him harder and shuddered. "Oh, god, Albus, Albus, Albus . . ." She slumped back against the wet tile. Flushed, she looked down at him as he released the Levitation spell and gently kissed her belly just below her navel. Just one gesture and one look from Minerva, and Albus stood to kiss her; she deepened the kiss and pulled him closer. Minerva pulled away only long enough to say, "More," and to wrap her right leg around him, trying to bring her centre closer to his erection.

"Mmm, Minerva. Minerva, I don't know . . . I don't think I can," Albus protested.

"The bench," Minerva said huskily, pushing him toward the small bench on the other side of the shower.

"It's not . . . not that," Albus gasped and pulled away from her.

Minerva caught her breath. "I thought it might just be too difficult . . . standing, with your hand, not being able to brace . . ."

"No, it's not that." Breathing heavily, Albus turned from her and leaned against the tile wall, resting his head on his forearm. Minerva came up behind him and rubbed his back.

"Then what?" She feared the answer, but believed she knew it.

"Severus."

"He is in the sitting room. He is quite happy for the moment."

"He will know."

"He must already. I shoed him out and told him I was going to take a shower. He had already said you were in the shower. He's a bright boy, Albus."

Albus moaned. "You didn't."

Minerva was silent for a moment. "I did. He was fine. And . . . I was not."

Albus turned. His erection was only flagging slightly. "You weren't?"

"I can't explain now, Albus. Please, though, don't turn away from me." Tears gathered in her eyes.

Albus enfolded her in his arms, careful not to put too much pressure on his right hand. He whispered, "I would think that what I just did was anything but turning away from you, my love. It won't bother you that Severus might know what we're doing?"

Minerva looked up at him, tears streaming down her face. "No . . . no. Please, Albus. I need you right now. I need to feel you. Please."

Albus closed his eyes and pulled her head to his chest. He chuckled softly. "I thought that last night was rather nice, myself."

"Mmm." Minerva nodded against his chest. "But that was last night."

Albus kissed her forehead then her cheek. When she raised her face to him, he gently kissed her lips, repeatedly kissing them, pulling them slightly into his mouth and then releasing them. Minerva moaned and opened her mouth to him as he continued to kiss her.

Albus let out a slight humming sigh as he drew back a bit to look at Minerva's flushed face and plumped lips. "We are getting wrinkly in the shower, my dear."

"We are already wrinkly, Albus," Minerva laughed and looked up at him.

"You are barely touched by time, my dear," Albus said, smiling. "I do think I am quite well-bathed, however." He waved his hand, and the shower heads turned off. "Now, you were saying something about a bench, but I think that perhaps this might be nicer."

He opened the shower door, and with a wave of his hand, several towels arranged themselves on the bathroom floor; another wave, and the towels became a soft, thin mattress. Albus pulled Minerva down to the floor with him, and, lying on his right side and embracing her with his left arm, he began kissing her face, her neck, her mouth . . . Minerva rolled over on top of him and continued to kiss him until she pulled away to gaze into his eyes and, with precision born of decades of practice, she straddled him and sank onto his cock. She paused a moment, lying on top of him, relishing the sensation of his cock filling her and his beard brushing her breasts. Albus began to thrust, gazing up at her, but she remained still, eyes closed, concentrating on the feel of him moving beneath her, until finally she couldn't bear being still and arched her back and moved with him. She could feel her orgasm building again; she opened her eyes and looked down at her beloved. Minerva sat up and began sliding back and forth on his cock, rubbing her clit against his pelvis, rhythmically flexing her muscles around him, and watching Albus's face as his own pleasure grew. Finally, she could feel her release coming, and she almost frantically pounded down on his cock and his pelvis until her vision filled with a field of stars and she was crying his name again. Albus swiftly rolled her over and, supporting himself on his left forearm, continued what she had begun, his cock stroking within her as she continued to come around him. With a final cry of "Minerva!" Albus came, pressing himself into her as deeply as he could.

Albus collapsed on top of Minerva. She put her arms around him and held on as though he might evaporate if she were to let go.

"Have I told you I love you, Minerva?" Albus whispered hoarsely in her ear.

"I think you may have mentioned it . . . my memory is not what it once was, though. You may need to remind me occasionally." She kissed his cheek.

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. "I have never been able to refuse you anything, my love."

"Hmph. I remember when you used to try, though."

"That was a very long time ago." He grinned impishly. "And if we had done this sooner, I never would have even tried."

Minerva gave him a playful slap, then kissed him again. She lay back and sighed. "I suppose we should get dressed and make ourselves look respectable."

"Oh, my god, Severus how long have you been in here, Minerva?"

"Not that long, Albus. I came directly from him. He should be fine for a while longer, don't worry."

"You are a terrible influence on me, my dear. I forget everything else." He eased out of her.

"I am sure that can only be good for you, Albus," she replied. "And you should let Severus know what a terrible influence I am. He seems to think I'm perfect!" She smiled, but her mood was changed with the mention of Severus.

They both got up and made a pretense of drying off, then went into the bedroom and dressed in silence, Albus in deep burgundy, Minerva in peacock blue.

"Albus?"

"Yes, love?"

"May we talk later today? Alone? It's important."

"Of course." He smiled, walked over to her, and gave her a kiss. "As I said, I cannot refuse you anything."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm afraid, Albus," she whispered.

"Shh, shh, don't be afraid, my love." He held her and kissed the top of her head. "We will speak soon, I promise. I think I will go check on Severus now, if that's all right?" he asked gently.

Minerva wiped her tears away and nodded. "That's fine. I'll be along in a minute." She kissed his cheek, and he left to find Severus.

A few moments later, Albus was back. "He's not there, Minerva!"

Four: Fearing Fate

Chapter 4 of 16

The spell continues to affect Severus as he wishes to escape its hold on him.



Chapter Four: Fearing Fate

"What did Severus say when he left?" Albus asked.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Just something like, 'all right,' then he left, I got out of bed, and then I came to find you," Minerva replied.

They went back out to the sitting room. "Did you check my study, Albus?"

"Of course and he wasn't hiding in all six square feet of your kitchen, either." Albus turned around in a circle, as though he expected Severus to suddenly appear where he hadn't been before. He looked over at Minerva, who was wringing her hands. "What was the last thing you said to him?"

"I don't know . . . something about making himself comfortable in the sitting room, using the loo if he needed did you check the loo? Of course you did."

"I'm going to Floo through to his rooms and look there. If he's not there, I'll check my office. You stay here in case he comes back."

Minerva sat on the settee beside Severus's carefully folded nightshirt. She picked up the book he had been reading the night before, flipped through to the section pertaining to *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*, and began to skim the text, which was grotesquely illustrated with moving pictures of wizards and witches who, unable to find relief from the imperative, were in the final throes of the spell. As she read, Minerva could see why Severus had suggested the potion the night before; these were the most horrific descriptions she had seen yet although a few were merely more lurid retellings of accounts she had found elsewhere and they were all filled with the most grisly, graphic details. When Minerva turned a page to find a picture of a wizard flaying the skin from his own chest with his fingernails, blood oozing from his self-inflicted wounds and running down his fingers, she slammed the book shut. Enough! Severus was *not* going to read any more about this damned curse. For that was what it was; Minerva didn't care how the textbooks classified it.

Her front door opened just then and Severus stumbled through it. Minerva rushed over to him and closed the door behind him. "Severus! What are you doing? What is all this? What were you thinking, man?" She almost shook him.

"I wanted to get these for you, Minerva." He held out a rather disparate bunch of flowers to her. "I wanted to make them into a nice bouquet for you," he said sorrowfully, "but I didn't have time. And," he added in a whisper, "I don't know how." A single tear trickled down his cheek.

Taking the somewhat scraggly-looking flowers from him and Levitating them over to the table and depositing them there, Minerva said, "They are lovely, Severus. Thank you. We can take care of them together, just as soon as we take care of you."

"I also brought you these books . . . well, they're for me, actually." His eyes were soft as he looked down at Minerva's face. "I thought perhaps, if you might allow it . . . I might . . . read to you later?"

"Yes, Severus, you may. But now come sit with me. You are pale and sweaty. I am worried about you."

"I'm always pale, Minerva, don't worry. And I was a little late and had to run all the way back up; I took the backstairs to avoid any dunderheads." He sat next to her on the couch. "You are too kind to worry about me, Minerva. Please, you needn't worry." He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "You look beautiful this morning. That colour is lovely on you." Severus caressed Minerva's arm. "It is soft, too. Gentle on your sweet skin." He raised her hand to his mouth again and kissed it. To Minerva's surprise, he slid from the sofa and knelt on the floor beside her. He placed his head in her lap, much as he had the night before, and sighed deeply. "I have never wished to kneel to anyone before, although I have had to . . . often." His breath caught in his throat.

"You needn't kneel to me, Severus." She stroked his hair.

"It's not the same at all. I like to. You . . . with you it is a comfort. It is like coming home. I love you, Minerva." He settled his head more comfortably and half-embraced her, his arm resting across her legs, his hand at her waist. He turned his head to kiss her thigh through her robes, then relaxed and sighed again.

Minerva wasn't sure what to say. She rested her hand on his head, almost in benediction, and, remembering what she had just seen in the book Severus was reading last night, she was filled with sudden sorrow. "As long as you find it a comfort, Severus," she whispered. "Just never kneel to me in supplication, please." She caressed his

cheek for a moment, then said, "You probably will want to sit up now, Severus. We need to find Albus. He's gone to look for you."

Severus looked up with alarm, sudden panic on his face. "Is he terribly angry?"

"He's worried about you, just as I was. You weren't here; you didn't leave a note. You never said you were going anywhere. We were very concerned."

Severus pulled himself back onto the sofa beside her. "I'm sorry, Minerva. I didn't think. All I could think of was . . ." He swallowed and looked down. "And I wanted to do something nice for you," he finally whispered.

"The flowers are lovely, Severus. I do appreciate them. As soon as we've found Albus, we'll put them in a vase. Are you all right now?"

"Fine. I'm fine." He looked over at her, then stood and walked over to the window and looked out. "I will leave a note if I leave again. I just . . ." He sighed, shook his head, and turned back to face Minerva. "I suppose I should help you find Albus. I presume he went to my rooms. I will look there; you check his office you could leave a message with one of the more lively portraits. I will return to your room in ten minutes."

Minerva smiled brightly at him. This was the most rationally he had seemed to plan since Friday afternoon.

"That sounds good. I will see you back here, then. Why don't you Floo through first?"

Ten minutes later, the two sat at the table in Minerva's sitting room waiting for Albus, whom they had been unable to find, and arranged Severus's rather sad bouquet in a vase. Minerva discreetly added a freshening charm to perk it up. With a bit of skilful trimming, since the stems were of such varied lengths, Minerva was able to help Severus create a respectable looking arrangement.

"I guess we won't be going to breakfast in the Great Hall this morning. Are you hungry, Severus? I could call Dobby or Wilsby."

"I could drink some coffee, I suppose."

Minerva called Wilsby, asking her to first find Albus and let him know that Severus was with her and then to bring coffee for Severus and a large pot of tea for her and Albus.

They were drinking their tea and coffee a few minutes later when Albus returned by Floo. A look of relief crossed his face. "Severus! Where did you get to, my boy?"

"He just went for a stroll, Albus. He brought some flowers. Aren't they nice?"

"Mmm, quite." Albus sat down and joined them. Minerva poured him a cup of tea.

"I thought that Severus and I could breakfast here. Are you going to the Great Hall?"

"I've looked in already. I just wanted to make sure that Severus hadn't decided to go on his own, though, so I didn't stay. There weren't many people there yet. I'll have some tea with you, then go downstairs for a bite to eat. You two could come, as well, if you like." He sipped his tea and leaned back in his chair.

"Do you mind if we wait until lunch, Albus? I just don't think I could deal with the logistics right now."

"That would be fine." Albus looked over at Severus, who was pouring himself a second cup of coffee. "Severus, you scared me to death. What possessed you to go off like that?"

Severus flushed. "I just needed some air, Albus, that's all. And I thought I'd pick some flowers." He stared into his coffee.

Albus opened his mouth to say more, but he felt Minerva's hand on his knee. She was shaking her head slightly. He took another sip of tea, instead, then said kindly, "They're quite nice flowers, too, Severus."

After he had finished his tea, Albus stood. "I had wanted to talk about how we might deal with the next few days, but we can discuss that when I get back from the Great Hall." He looked at Minerva. "You'll both be all right while I'm gone?"

"Yes, Albus, we're fine. You go on." She squeezed his hand and smiled at him.

"All right then, I'll be off." He hesitated. "And if either of you goes for a walk, make sure the other knows, hmm?"

"Yes, Albus. We've already discussed that. Just give me a kiss and get going!"

He kissed the top of Minerva's head, patted Severus's shoulder, and left for breakfast.

"I am very hungry, actually, Severus. I'm going to have Dobby bring us some breakfast. Would you like anything in particular?"

"No, just the coffee."

"It would please me if you ate something, Severus."

He looked at her, his mouth half open as though he were about to speak, hands clenching his coffee cup. Letting out his breath in a rush, he put his cup down with a rattle and pushed away from the table. He began to pace, not looking at her.

"Severus? What is it?"

"This damned curse! I hate it! I hate Parkinson. I wish I could hit her with this spell and then lock her away in a room somewhere to suffer and die. I hate her more than I've ever hated anyone in my life," he cried. In his anguish, he raised his fist and struck the wall beside the bedroom door. "I even hate magic. It's a cruel, foul thing. I wish I'd been born a Squib! No, I wish I had *never* been *born* at all!" He hit the wall again and again, tears streaming down his face.

Severus had no time to realise that she'd got out of her chair before Minerva was at his side. She caught up his fist before he was able to do more damage to himself. The wall was limestone and had survived far worse than Severus Snape's fist. She held his hand to her chest, restraining it.

"Please don't do this, Severus. Please talk to me. You can talk to me. You can tell me anything you like; I won't share it with anyone if you ask me not to, and I can promise you that I won't think less of you."

Severus couldn't look at her. He gingerly extricated his hand from her grasp. Shaking his head, he turned from her and walked over to the settee. He slumped onto it and leaned forward, holding his head in his left hand and wiping his tears away. His right hand was rapidly swelling and turning colour. "You wouldn't think less of me . . . it probably wouldn't be *possible* to have a lower opinion of me," he said harshly.

Minerva came and stood beside him. "I thought you believed me when I told you how much I care for you, Severus," she chided mildly.

"I do believe you . . . but at the same time, I can't; there's a part of me still that can't believe it."

Minerva sat down. "Let me see your hand, Severus. Hmm, I haven't done this in a while . . . would you like to take your chances and have me take care of it, or would you

prefer that I send for Poppy? Or bring you to the infirmary?"

He just nodded at her. Minerva cast an *Episkey* followed by a *Detumescens* Charm to relieve the swelling. "How does that feel? The only other spell I know that I could use for this would be the *Solatus*, and that's not particularly strong. Perhaps a potion?"

"No, no. This is fine. Thank you, Minerva." He flexed his fingers and winced slightly. "That was foolish of me."

"You were upset. Do you know why specifically? Obviously, the spell is distressing . . ."

"It's just . . . you said it would please you if I ate something. I want to please you so much, Minerva, but I resent . . . I ~~resent~~^{wanting} to please you. And I resent wanting to do something I don't want to do, if that makes any sense . . . Although I should eat, I suppose." He hung his head.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I just . . . I think you should eat. I shouldn't have asked you the way I did. It was unfair of me."

"No, you are right; I should eat. You were not asking me to do anything that I shouldn't do." He looked up at her and reached for her hand. Taking it, he watched as his thumb gently rubbed her knuckles. "If I had been fool enough . . . or unlucky enough . . . I can't imagine anyone else but you, but I know that many women would be asking things of me . . ." He looked into her eyes. "I could be your slave, Minerva. Or you could ask me to slit my throat, and I believe I would do it . . . perhaps not today, but eventually, if I believed it would make you happy . . ." He stopped and closed his eyes. "There was a wizard in one of the books I read yesterday . . . he lived for over a year with this curse before he finally died. His heart just stopped. The woman granted him just enough access to her to permit him to survive. If his body hadn't finally given out from the strain, it might have continued longer. He was beyond the point where he could have even taken his own life. She wasn't even particularly cruel. But I suppose she simply didn't care enough for him . . . and she had a husband," he sighed.

"It sounds to me as though she was completely unworthy of his love. To have permitted him to suffer for so long . . ."

"There have been worse cases. I actually think that some of the witches struck by the spell have suffered more. One witch was unfortunate enough to be married, but not to the man who was her true love. Her husband, who was the bastard who cast the spell, locked her away. She went mad in less than a week and was dead in two."

"Severus, before you came back this morning, I had already decided that you weren't to read any more of those accounts. Most of the books just repeat the same stories, anyway, and they don't seem to contain any information that would help us just a lot of grisly details that don't benefit anyone and that can only make you feel worse."

"I did make some notes about things some wizards tried that didn't worked. But you are right; I don't think I've found anything new in a while. You are very kind to have thought of that, Minerva." He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "I have been very fortunate, although . . ." He averted his gaze and let go of her hand.

"What is it? You may tell me, Severus. You don't have to if you don't want to, of course."

"I wish you would reconsider."

"Reconsider what?"

"The potion, Minerva. I do not believe I would suffer as much as some, and not for as long, perhaps, because you have been so kind. But it may be inevitable . . . and because of my other role, I may become a danger to you in some way."

"It is not inevitable, Severus. I have told you before, we will not let you suffer and die. I am sorry for the suffering you are already experiencing, but I have told you that I do not want you to make yourself ill by prolonging the interval unnecessarily. You surely cannot believe that I would allow you to go mad and die, do you?"

"If we cannot find a solution . . ." He let out a deep sigh. "I don't think I can talk about this anymore, if that's all right?"

"Of course. Now, you have held my hand, but how do you feel?"

"A little anxious, but not terribly. We can get back to work, if you like."

"Good. Now, I am going to call Dobby for some hot buttered scones and some fresh tea and coffee. If you are hungry, it would be good for you to eat, but you don't need to if you don't want to. After that, we will make a plan for the rest of the morning."

After they had each had a few scones Severus ate three, surprising himself Minerva cleared away their breakfast and Levitated the parchments containing their notes back onto the table. Minerva set Severus to sorting through the parchments containing all their notes, putting them into some kind of order, and Minerva picked up a text containing descriptions of unusual uses for spells that affect mind and memory. She would leave the scrolls to Albus, since he already seemed familiar with their contents.

Almost two hours later, Albus found them seated at Minerva's table, Severus with a stack of parchments at his left and apparently making notes on another one, and Minerva with a thin book with yellowed pages open before her.

"I am sorry I was not back sooner. There were a few . . . situations I had to deal with." The two looked up at him in curiosity. He hesitated. "Nothing to worry either of you, and nothing to do with our current problem. Although, Severus, I did take the liberty of disciplining three of your Slytherins in your stead. I did not take any points, and I attempted to fashion punishments that would conform to your usual standards. Madam Pomfrey was going to try to find you to have you take care of them. I hope you don't mind that I stepped in?"

Severus, thinking of what would have happened if he had been away from Minerva for too long, and of his diminished capacity for rational thought, just shook his head. "Perhaps later you could tell me what it was about, though, so I am not ignorant of the goings on in my House and in case they come to me with protests about your punishments." When it appeared that Albus was about to answer him, he added, "It would do no good to tell me now. I am having difficulty concentrating at the moment." Indeed, Albus noticed, he had been rhythmically bouncing his right heel up and down and appeared to be trembling slightly.

"Ah. That's fine, Severus. I think I will wash up, then rejoin you in a moment." Albus left Minerva's sitting room and went into her bedroom to use the large bathroom. Despite his acceptance of the situation, he did not particularly wish to be standing there watching as Severus fawned over Minerva. He could avoid even hearing him if he used the master bathroom rather than the small loo off the sitting room. It was one thing to lie there and pretend to be asleep, as he had done that morning, and quite another to be obviously awake and aware of what was going on. He had no idea what kind of reaction to present. Clearly, intense interest would be inappropriate, and yet to appear not to notice anything . . . that might be all right with Severus, who seemed fairly oblivious to the rest of the world when he was in the throes of the spell's imperative, but after seeing Minerva's tears that morning, Albus feared she would interpret any nonchalance on his part as uncaring or cold-hearted.

Albus sighed as he looked into the mirror after washing his hands. He was old. Ancient, the students would say. They had been saying that for decades, and it only became more true with the passing years. After the curse on the Peverell ring had struck him, he had felt tired and drained for days, despite the fact that he and Severus had halted the curse's progress. As the weeks passed, most of his stamina had returned, but Albus knew that he had less energy than he used to. Although he had been old when he and Minerva had first realised that their feelings about each other were mutual, it now seemed to him that he had been quite young compared to the wizard who now looked back at him from the mirror. And Albus knew that, regardless of the war's progress, he would not live to see the end of it, whether he died a natural death or was killed. He truly believed that death was the next great adventure; Albus only regretted leaving behind those he loved. And he feared for their safety not that he had ever been able to guarantee anyone's safety, Albus thought with a sigh. But while he was still here, he would help them as much as he was able, and he would continue to love Minerva every day, as he had for almost forty years longer, actually, although she hadn't been aware of it then.

Albus dried his hands and returned to the sitting room. Severus was now on the settee reading a small leather-bound book; Minerva was seated at the table, slightly flushed, looking over her notes. Albus's throat constricted when the unbidden question rose in his mind as to what might have caused her to flush. He had been completely honest with her the night before. There was no question that he did not want Minerva to merely endure Severus's attentions, even as they grew more ardent, and he did

not even want her to be uncomfortable with them. Nonetheless, the thought that another man might be arousing her . . . Albus shook himself inwardly; Minerva did not choose this. Neither did Severus. She never would have sought out another man let alone Severus, Albus was certain, as fond as Minerva was of the younger wizard and if they were able to find a third option, he was sure that she would be relieved. Albus looked back over at Severus, who appeared to be reading a book of poetry. At least he wasn't someone Minerva would find unbearable such as Mundungus Fletcher. That thought was truly grotesque, and imagining the grubby, smelly drunk drooling over Minerva, Albus suppressed a mild shudder of disgust.

"Perhaps we could discuss the current state of the situation," Albus suggested.

Minerva got up and moved to one of the armchairs; Albus sat across from her in the wingback chair they had shared the night before. Severus put his book down and gazed attentively at Albus. Albus was struck by the fact that Severus was neither scowling nor looking bored; his usual reasons for scowling must have been overwhelmed by the *Adfectus*.

"Why don't you two both tell me where you are in your research, and then I will present my proposal?"

Minerva began. "Severus has taken the notes that the three of us have made and has begun organising them. He has also begun a comprehensive list of alternatives that have been tried and have not succeeded in the past. We determined that we have exhausted the texts that merely recount the effects of the curse; from now on, I will continue to work on the theoretical angle in hope of finding either a heretofore unattempted solution or of discovering a countermeasure that had previously failed, but which might be altered if the cause of its failure can be discovered and remedied." Minerva glanced at Severus before continuing. "I have thus far been unable to identify any such solutions. However, you are more experienced with such things, and I would like you to see if you agree."

"Severus, do you have anything to add?"

Severus blinked, swallowed, and looked down at his hands. "No. Minerva magnificently summarised the current results of our research." He looked as though he were struggling to say something.

"Yes, Severus? What is it, my boy?"

"She is utterly brilliant, with a quickness of mind and capacity for rational thought that is rare to find," Severus said rapidly, looking up at Minerva.

"Yes, she is, isn't she? Now then, I think we can move on to my proposal. I have had Wilspys assist me, and I hope you both find it agreeable. I believe you both can see that the current arrangement having Severus spend most of his time in Minerva's rooms will be untenable for very much longer. In addition, there is the problem of Severus's teaching. I believe that I have a plan that will address both of these difficulties.

"I have set up and isolated a set of rooms in a little-used corridor that has always been warded against student intrusion. It does not even appear on Harry's map." It was a sign of how far the *Adfectus* had progressed when this pronouncement brought absolutely no reaction from Severus, not even a sneer or raised eyebrow. Albus sighed and continued, "I have cast additional wards, and Wilspys has rearranged the rooms and the furniture. I propose moving you both there soon tonight, if you both agree."

"But Albus, what of our Houses? And how will this assist us with the problem of Severus's classes?" Minerva asked. Albus could see she was concerned that this was leading up to an immediate solution for which she was unprepared.

"I am coming to that, my dear. You both know that it is important that the Dark Lord not realise that Severus is suffering from this spell or that anything else is out of the ordinary here. I propose that this evening in the Great Hall during dinner, Minerva become ill, visibly so. We will bring her to the Hospital Wing, Poppy will put her in an isolation room, unable to receive any visitors, and I will smuggle her out of the infirmary in her Tabby form."

Albus could see that Minerva was brimming with questions, so he hurriedly continued, addressing her directly. "This would mean, of course, that you, Minerva, would be unable to teach until we deal with the *Adfectus*; however, this is more easily dealt with than Severus's unexplained absence from his own duties. I will cover your classes for you, my dear. This will allow you, in your Animagus form, to remain in Severus's office while he teaches. In between classes, he can see you, and he can bring you back to the warded quarters at the end of the day."

Severus asked, "This seems fine, in theory, at least, but what about my double sessions? I do not believe I could last two hours without her."

"You have no double classes on Monday and only one on Tuesday. You can dismiss the class early on the pretence that they are all dunderheads who need to do research in the library," Albus said with a slight smile. "If by Wednesday, we have not reached a solution . . ." Albus sighed, removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. "If by Wednesday earlier, if need be we have not reached a solution, I will announce to the staff that I have sent you on an expedition to gather some rare potion ingredients that are needed to effect a cure for Minerva. Poppy and I have come up with a suitable illness that meets all of our requirements." He looked over at Minerva. "I am sorry, my dear, but this will require you to briefly become genuinely, although mildly, ill in order to create the proper effect "

"*No! Absolutely not!*" Severus leapt up. "I will not allow Minerva to be injured in any way I will *die* before I let anyone do anything to her!" He began breathing rapidly, hyperventilating. "You cannot do this to her!"

Minerva stood and went over to Severus. "Come, let's sit down together, Severus, hmm? I am sure it won't be too terrible," she said with a smile as she coaxed him down to sit on the sofa.

"I would never allow any injury to come to Minerva, myself, Severus." Albus thought briefly of the Stunners that had hit Minerva a few months back; he took little satisfaction that the punishment inflicted on Umbridge by the centaurs was the most that she was likely ever to receive, circumstances as they were. If *he* had been there, on the other hand . . . Taking a deep breath, he continued his explanation. "Minerva, during dinner, you will administer yourself a potion, which I myself have brewed. Within five minutes, you will begin to sweat profusely and experience . . . muscle spasms." He could describe the seizure to her in greater detail when they were alone. "Because both Severus and I will be prepared for this to happen, we will ensure that you do not accidentally injure yourself. Shortly after the spasms begin, you will lose consciousness. I will direct Severus to assist me and to carry you bodily from the Great Hall to the infirmary. If anyone tries to use *Mobilicorpus*, I or Poppy will explain that, until we know what has afflicted you, it is best not to use *Mobilicorpus* because of the muscle spasms, which will continue to occur sporadically for approximately twenty minutes."

Albus looked at Severus with some concern; although it had not yet been an hour since Severus had acted on the imperative, he was rocking back and forth ever so slightly, eyes closed. "Severus? Are you all right?"

"Yes," he whispered. "I am trying to be rational. It is . . . difficult. The spell is overwhelming and I will be fine, though."

Minerva spoke up. "Albus, if he's affected this way now, what will he be like when we carry out this plan?" She turned to Severus. "Severus, if I assure you that this is what I want to do and that I am confident that no harm will come to me, especially with both you and Albus beside me, does that help?"

"I don't know," the younger wizard replied. He had begun to tremble slightly.

Albus watched as Minerva gently placed her hand on Severus's knee. "I would so appreciate it if you were to carry me from the Great Hall. It would be very gallant, Severus, and truly a gesture of love," she said softly.

Albus could immediately see the calming effect of Minerva's words and touch. Severus opened his eyes, his trembling diminished, and the slight back-and-forth rocking ceased altogether.

"If you wish me to do this for you, you know that I will, my sweet Minerva," Severus said, looking into Minerva's eyes and laying his hand over hers. "I can do nothing other than what you wish of me," he whispered helplessly, his eyes moist.

Minerva lay her other hand on top of Severus's. "I know, Severus, and I would not ask it of you if it weren't very important. I hope you understand that. I do not wish to exploit your current state," she said quietly.

Albus felt slightly out-of-place, as though there was something that he had missed, but he sat calmly and waited for Severus to recover himself. Minerva was handling him very well, he thought, his pride in her outweighing any feelings of discomfort.

"I know, Minerva. I am very fortunate to love one as worthy as you." Severus let out a shuddering sigh and looked away from Minerva. When his eyes met Albus's, he flushed and removed his hand from Minerva's. He cleared his throat. "Albus. You were explaining your plans. I am sorry for my interruption."

Albus smiled kindly. "That's fine, Severus, as long as your concerns have been allayed." When Severus nodded, Albus continued, "The bogus quest for potion ingredients will allow Severus to join you in your special quarters until a solution has been found."

"That sounds agreeable to me, and I assume that you will be taking care of Gryffindor House, but what of Slytherin? Severus's House depends on him, as well. He has already been absent from them for more than a day."

"I am aware of that. I think that it would be good if Severus looked in on his House a few times today, during the intervals you must ensure that you do not dally, and if you think you will need an excuse to get away from them, I can arrange for Minerva, Poppy, or me to contact you about something or other in order to give you a reason to leave. Poppy does not know why we are doing what we are doing, if you are concerned about that, Severus. I told her that there is sensitive Order business at stake and that I could tell her nothing else. You can do likewise on Monday and Tuesday. When you are 'away,' I will have Professor Slughorn step in for the time being."

"What of Slughorn, though, Albus? Won't he be put out that you have apparently asked me to work on this potion, and not him?"

"I will explain it to him this way: it would require him to leave the castle and become a target of Death Eaters. That should assuage any hurt feelings on his part."

Suddenly Severus said, "Oh! And what about my classes?"

Normally, Severus would have immediately asked about his House and his classes. Although he was distressed by Severus's inability to concentrate and his clearly changed priorities, Albus smiled at the other wizard. "I have spoken with both Remus and Kingsley, without specifying precisely why I would want them to be available, and each of them is willing to help, although they don't yet know with what. Kingsley said he has some leave coming up that he can take, and Remus, of course, has fewer restrictions on his availability."

"Except the full moon, Albus." His eyes glassy, Severus asked, "I've been trying to think; when's the next full moon?"

This was truly alarming as both a Potions master and as a Defence teacher, Severus always knew which phase of the moon they were in. Not to mention that he had just brewed Remus his Wolfsbane Potion the previous week. Albus swallowed and answered, "It just passed three days ago, so he is unrestricted in that way."

"Oh. Good. Don't want him around the students if he's a danger."

"Do you have a preference, Severus, for whom I should ask to come and cover your classes?" Albus expected Severus to name Kingsley they had a cordial relationship and didn't have the complicated history that he and Lupin had.

"Oh, Lupin will do. He's taught here before. He's competent, unlike most. Don't know if Shackbolt can teach, for all that he's a decent Auror. No point in drawing the Ministry's attention, either." Severus sighed. "And I . . . may not return to teaching, after all, and Kingsley already has a job."

"What do you mean, you may not return to teaching?" Albus asked, more alarmed by that statement than by Severus's willingness to have Remus teach his class.

"If we don't find a solution, we know what will happen," Severus answered quietly.

Minerva looked at Albus, thin-lipped.

"My boy, I have told you that we will not allow you to die. I know that Minerva also feels that way."

"So she tells me." He looked quickly at Minerva. "I believe you, Minerva. You are too kind-hearted to wish the death even of one such as myself." His eyes were soft and filled with unveiled admiration.

"Albus, could you give Severus and me a moment alone, please?"

"Of course, my dear. I think I will just Floo up to my office for a few minutes."

"Good but then please come back."

After Albus had Flooed away, Minerva turned to Severus. "Severus, my dear, you must know that we will not let you die. And we will not let you go mad."

Severus nodded. "But that doesn't fit with anything I have learned of the curse, Minerva. I may not be at my most rational, but even I can see that."

Minerva sighed. "Albus will be returning shortly, and I have a few things I want to attend to before lunch. I would like to be able to leave you alone for a little while, Severus, so perhaps we might . . . ?"

Severus's features relaxed into a smile. "You were very kind to me earlier. I appreciate all you have done for me." He caressed Minerva's cheek and took her hand in his. "It is lovely, this feeling of gratitude toward you. Even when you ask something of me, I do not resent you. My only resentment is toward the spell and Parkinson. I never understood that gratitude could be anything other than painful, my love."

Letting out a deep sigh, Severus leaned toward Minerva. She consciously kept herself from stiffening as he approached her. His lips brushed her cheek, then her jaw; his kisses moved toward her ear, then down to her pulse point. He kissed her throat, then her earlobe again, pausing to whisper, "You are the most wonderful creature to ever walk this earth, Minerva, my sweet," before his lips moved to the spot just behind her ear, and then slowly began to trail kisses around her neck to her pulse point. He paused and drew back, tears in his eyes. "You are frightened of me, Minerva," he choked.

Minerva lifted her hand to his face. "No, Severus, I am not afraid of you! Why would you say such a thing?"

"Your heart is pounding. I must have frightened you. I am sorry."

"No, Severus. I was not frightened of you. If I had been frightened, I would have moved away. Come here." She put an arm around him and gently urged him to lean against her. He relaxed and put his head on her chest, closing his eyes. "There, now, Severus. How is that?"

"Fine. Good." His hand was resting at Minerva's waist in a half-embrace.

Minerva kissed the top of his head. "You will be fine, Severus. I promise." She felt him nod against her as he sighed deeply.

They were sitting like that a few minutes later when Albus Flooed through. Severus jumped up and moved away from Minerva. Minerva rose more deliberately and went over and kissed Albus's cheek before she turned to Severus.

"Severus, I need to speak with Albus alone just for a little while. We will be in the next room if you need either of us. Please do not go anywhere, all right?"

Severus, who had returned to the table and was sorting through the parchments again, just nodded.

Minerva led Albus into the bedroom. As soon as the door was closed, she turned and embraced him, leaning heavily into his chest. Albus put his arms around her and gently rubbed her back.

"You said earlier that you needed to speak with me?"

"Yes, Albus. Can we sit down together? Or lie down? I just want you to hold me a bit."

Minerva cast an Imperturbable before they lay down on the bed. Minerva snuggled close to him, letting out a deep sigh. "Albus, I am frightened."

"Tell me, Minerva," Albus whispered.

"I . . . this morning, before I joined you . . . I tried to do as you suggested last night. I relaxed. And it wasn't bad at first, but then, as soon as I felt anything, it was just Albus, I don't want to have anyone but you to bring out feelings like those, so I ran in to see you. I needed it to be you, Albus, always and only you," she said softly.

"And this frightens you, wanting it to be me?"

"No, it frightens me to think that anyone *else* could do that to me."

Albus was silent a moment. "It is only important to me that you want it to be me alone and that you will return to me. I do not mean by this that I would be in any way unmoved if you were to . . . do this under normal circumstances."

"I wouldn't! I would never even dream of it!"

"I know you wouldn't," Albus replied, turning his head to kiss her briefly. "That is one of the only aspects that makes this situation tolerable for me, my love."

"I also fear hurting you, Albus."

"I love you beyond all else, Minerva, and so you have the greatest potential to hurt me; however, knowing you as I do, knowing that you would never choose this situation, and knowing that you do not wish to hurt me, I can assure you that you will *not* hurt me. Your actions in this situation will not hurt me."

"How can they not?"

"It is not that I am happy with it, as I have already told you. And the situation does distress me, although I am trying to control that for all our sakes. But it is not you who have brought this about, therefore, what you will do will not hurt me. You are not choosing it in order to injure me or with disregard for my feelings. It *will* help Severus, but it will *not* hurt me, although I will not be jumping for joy over it. Do you understand?"

Minerva blinked back tears. "Yes. But . . ."

"But what?"

"But," she whispered, "I am afraid you won't want me after, if . . ."

Albus rolled over and held her as tightly as he could without injuring his hand. "I always want you, Minerva. That will not change till the moment I die. I promise you. Even if you left me, I would want you. I love you."

Minerva nodded. "I would never leave you, Albus. And that is part of it. I never wanted to be with anyone else . . . Severus thought I was afraid earlier, because my pulse was racing. I told him that I wasn't afraid, but I was, just not of him. And I was trying to follow your advice, so it wasn't only fear that caused my pulse to quicken, and I felt guilty because of it."

"Do not feel guilty, Minerva. Remember, I *want* you to take what pleasure you may. I do not want you to feel disgusted or trapped or frightened or guilty. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "Yes, and I will try." She thought for a moment. "It helped some this morning that I looked at one of the books Severus had been reading. The descriptions were vivid and horrific, Albus; it even had pictures of what happens to wizards who can't fulfill the imperative. That is why I told Severus not to read any more of them."

"Ah, I *had* wondered about that."

"Having compassion for him has helped me. And I *do* love him as a friend."

"Then draw on that love, as well. You cannot betray me, my dear. It is not possible. Remember that, no matter what happens, all right?"

"All right." Minerva paused, wondering if she dared ask the next question. She rolled away from him and sat on the edge of the bed. "Albus?"

"Yes, my dear?" Albus sat beside her.

"What if, in the end, I do not want . . . I cannot . . . if I cannot do the final act, what will we ~~what~~ *will* you do?"

Albus sat and looked down at the carpet. "I can do nothing, my love. It is not I who can release Severus from this curse. I cannot take your place, although I would willingly do so." He sighed, thinking. Polyjuice had been tried before, but whether the afflicted person knew of the exchange or not, the *spell* seemed to know, and it was never satisfied by the substitution. "I suppose we could try Polyjuice, though. If you cannot go through with it, I will substitute myself for you at the last minute without telling Severus. It is likely to be futile, but perhaps it will work in this instance. You and I have been together for so long, perhaps we could fool the spell."

"No. There would be no point in that, I think." Minerva was surprised at Albus's willingness to do this for her and for Severus. She was quite sure that he had no sexual interest in other men, nor any in Severus, for that matter. "What else might we try? If I cannot go through with it?"

"I think the only thing would be to make a potion available to him, as he suggested." Albus's eyes filled with tears; he turned his head from her and blinked them away. "Best he have the most dignified end possible under these conditions, I suppose."

"Would you . . . would you . . . be very angry with me if I couldn't?" she asked softly.

"How could I be?"

"Wouldn't you . . . ask me to do it, anyway?"

"No! Minerva, is that what this is about? Do you feel that I am pressuring you into this? Oh, Minerva, my dear, you already have so much pressure on you just from the situation itself. I am sorry if you have felt that I have asked you to do this!"

"No, I never felt that." Minerva felt embarrassed to admit the reason for her question and its lead-up.

"What, then?"

"I am ashamed to admit this, Albus, but I just needed to know . . . *know* that I am important to you, but I needed to know whether my choice, my ability to choose, was important to you *not* whether Severus's life was more or less important to you than my choice, although I suppose that is implied in my question."

"His life *is* important to me, and I would do almost anything to save it, Minerva. But I would not sacrifice *you* in any way whatsoever."

"I am sorry to put you through this."

He chuckled. "I am sure that what you are going through is far worse, my dear."

"And it is worse, still, for Severus. I will do what is necessary, and I will do it out of love and compassion, but . . . Albus? Would you talk to him before lunch? I have a few things I'd like to do before my 'grave illness' sets in and I would prefer it if you would speak with him about the likely solution. I would rather not be here for that, if it's all right."

"Of course, my love." Albus kissed her cheek. "Let's go see how he's doing. You should let him have a kiss or whatever he's doing at this stage, so that we have plenty of time for our talk. I may need to speak with him about it again later; I will tell him only as much as he seems able to hear."

They returned to the living room to find Severus stretched out on the couch, a book of poetry lying open across his chest, glassy-eyed, staring at the ceiling.

"Severus, dear, would you sit up?" Minerva went to sit beside him. "I mentioned that I have a few things I want to do before tonight, so Albus will stay here with you and keep you company for a while. Before I leave, though, you had better . . . 'recharge,' hmm?"

Severus cast a glance at Albus, then fixed his full attention on Minerva. "May I read you a poem before you leave, Minerva, my sweet?"

"Of course, you may."

"It's by Keats, a Muggle poet do you like Muggle poets? Wizards write terrible poetry these days, and none of the ancient wizarding poems would suit you. He wrote it for some anonymous person. It could have been written for you, though, Minerva."

"That's fine, Severus."

Albus sat in an armchair and watched as Severus, his dour and sarcastic Defence teacher, knelt at Minerva's feet and began to read, his dark voice sonorous.

"Hadst thou liv'd in days of old,

"O what wonders had been told

"Of thy lively countenance,

"And thy humid eyes that dance

"In the midst of their own brightness;

"In the very fane of lightness.

"Over which thine eyebrows, leaning,

"Picture out each lovely meaning:

"In a dainty bend they lie,

"Like two streaks across the sky,

"Or the feathers from a crow,

"Fallen on a bed of snow."

Albus listened absent-mindedly as Severus continued to read the poem to Minerva. Yes, perhaps it was a fitting poem. Albus tried to remember which poem he had last read to her and, failing in that effort, turned his attention back to Severus's recitation.

"O, if thou hadst breathed then,

"Now the Muses had been ten.

"Couldst thou wish for lineage higher

"Than twin sister of Thalia?

"At least for ever, evermore,

"Will I call the Graces four."

Severus stopped and sighed, closing the book. "There's more, but I will save it for later." He took Minerva's hand in his and kissed her palm and inner wrist. He looked up at her face. "Your own beauty is greater still, sweet Minerva, but I am no poet, or *you* would be my Muse." He raised a hand and caressed her cheek, lingering down around her jaw, until, softly brushing his fingertips across her lips, he sighed and lowered his head to kiss her knee through her robes. "You *are* my Grace, however, and I will live for you, and as you ask it, I will die for you."

"I would not ask that of you, Severus." Minerva stroked his hair and gently urged him to sit up. "I need to leave now. I will be back soon, and we can go to lunch."

Minerva rose as soon as Severus had removed himself from her path. She stopped and placed her hand on Albus's shoulder. He had a book, upside-down, in front of him. She doubted that Severus, in his haze, had noticed. "I will return, Albus," she said softly. "*Always.*"

He looked up at her and smiled. "I know. I will see you later, my dear."

Minerva looked into his bright blue eyes a moment, and her own misted over. She blinked her tears away, and with a squeeze to his arm, she turned and left.

Albus looked over at the dark-haired wizard seated across from him. His recent performance, kneeling to recite poetry to Minerva, should have seemed amusing to him, but it hadn't. It had been sad, even pathetic.

"Severus, while Minerva's gone, I thought we could talk a bit."

"It's all right, Albus. I know what you are going to say. I understand. I tried to tell Minerva, but she wouldn't listen. I am prepared. And I am sorry for all the trouble I have caused you . . . and for any pain."

"Thank you for your apology, but as for the other, I think we must be speaking at cross purposes, Severus. What did you try to tell Minerva?"

"That it is no use, but that I can face it. That a potion would bring a quick end to this; she would no longer have to suffer my presence or my attentions. But she will not listen to me, Albus. Perhaps you could explain it to her. Until she releases me, I cannot release myself."

"A potion? If you are speaking of 'release' as in 'suicide,' I cannot agree to that. At least not at this point."

Severus buried his face in his hands. "It is torment for us all," he said, anguished. He looked at Albus again. "Surely it must be torment for you, as well?"

"I am not sure I would classify it as 'torment,' Severus, although I can truthfully say that if I could undo the events of the last few days, I would do so in a heartbeat, and not just for your sake."

"Then why don't you agree with me? Is it just my work? The role I have yet to play? Fate does not always cooperate with our mortal plans, as well you know, Albus. I believe this was fated to occur. It is an ironic end for me, to be sure, and there must be some justice in it somewhere."

"This may or may not have been fated to happen, Severus, but I do believe that we must continue to look for a way out of this for you. Do you honestly believe that Minerva or I would be happy if this idiotic spell cost you your life?"

"With all you know of me, Albus, it still surprises me that you do not see that it would be easier for us all if I were dead. Perhaps this is a better end and a better time to die than any other."

"You are young yet, Severus, and aside from my personal feelings on the matter, I believe you still have a vital role to play before Riddle meets his end."

"You really believe the boy will succeed?"

"I must. *And* I believe in you, Severus. But as I told you yesterday, if Riddle were to die at this very moment, fully and finally, we three would still seek a solution."

Severus grimaced. "There is only death for me, then. Madness and death." He closed his eyes.

"We will not allow that, Severus. I know that you are not yourself now and it is difficult to think, but hasn't Minerva been helping you? The time you spend with her, the affection you show her, is that not helping you maintain your sanity?"

"Yes, yes, it is, but soon " Severus sighed. "Eventually kissing her . . . as I do now, and reading her poetry or extolling her virtues, soon that will not be enough, Albus."

"I am sure that you and Minerva will find new ways for you to express yourself to her, Severus," Albus said patiently.

"New ways," Severus said mournfully. "Soon she will tire of it, find me disgusting and unbearable . . . Perhaps then she will consider the potion."

"I do not doubt that it is wearying to be the focus of your attention and to know that you are dependent on her presence, but I do not believe that she will ever find you disgusting and unbearable as long as you continue to be kind and sweet to her."

Severus looked at Albus with disbelief. "Kind and sweet? That may not be difficult now, but over time . . ."

"You will work it out with Minerva, I am sure." Albus paused. "Severus, may I ask something of you? You needn't promise; I wouldn't try to extract a promise from you under these circumstances."

"Ask me, Albus. It is your right almost as much as it is Minerva's . . . and I am very sorry. Although you say it is not a torment, I do find that hard to believe although I am not particularly rational most of the time, so I may be wrong."

"This is something that would ease my mind, then." Albus looked seriously at the unhappy wizard seated across from him. "I would like to ask you to always be gentle with Minerva and to think of her. It is not simply a matter of not disgusting her, my boy, it is a matter of making her comfortable and of . . . um, it is a matter of making her happy."

Severus stared at Albus. "Not a matter of . . . I cannot make her happy, Albus. I can try to make her comfortable with me, though."

Albus heaved a great sigh and took off his glasses, setting them down on the small table beside him. He rubbed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose, then rested his head in his left hand a moment. "Severus, you are likely correct: you cannot make her happy. But you can do more than just make her comfortable. You can try to make it a pleasant experience for her." Albus swallowed, looking at Severus for any reaction. "Severus, I am asking you to try to please Minerva. Try to help her enjoy herself."

Severus just sat and blinked at Albus. Finally, he said, "I don't think I understand, Albus. I am sorry. It must be the spell is affecting me more than I believed. I thought you said . . . are you saying that you want me to bring Minerva pleasure?"

"You understood me correctly," Albus answered tersely. He concentrated on relaxing and controlling his breathing.

Severus shook his head. "I have only been hoping that she could tolerate me . . . that she could tolerate just one more touch, just one more kiss, just one more word."

The two wizards sat in silence. Finally Severus stood and went to the window to look out. Students were milling about in the courtyard below. He turned and came back over to Albus.

"Albus, you know that the spell is affecting my judgment and my cognitive abilities." When Albus nodded, Severus continued, "To the extent that I have understood you, I can tell you that I will do my best to do as you have asked me. Perhaps it will even help to calm the spell, for I do only want to be good to Minerva. I just have not believed that I could do anything other than express myself to her and be grateful that she tolerated me."

"Thank you, Severus. It means a lot to me."

"I don't completely understand why, though, Albus."

"Think of how you feel about Minerva. Now imagine that someone else was struck by the same spell you were. Would you want Minerva to merely tolerate the presence and attentions of the other person, or would you want her to be happy?"

Severus looked torn. "I would want to kill the bastard," he finally choked out.

Albus laughed. "All right, I suppose that was not a good example to provide you while you are in your present state. Imagine, instead, the following: you were not hit by this curse, and Mundungus Fletcher was. Do you think that Minerva could do anything but barely tolerate him?"

Severus shuddered visibly. "That is a dreadful thought, Albus."

"Perhaps you see now. Mundungus could never bring Minerva any pleasure at least I highly doubt it! but *you* may be able to. I do not want to have Minerva burdened by

this spell any more than absolutely necessary. For me, that means that if your attentions can be enjoyable for her, I would prefer it."

"It is not only up to me; it depends on Minerva. I do not know if she would welcome anything like that from me. In my more lucid moments, I can see that even gestures such as I have shown her to this point are nothing that she would ordinarily accept from me. That is why I am so grateful to her."

"Work with her, then, Severus, and as your attentions to her advance, keep in mind her pleasure. As you say, it may help calm the spell's imperative."

"I will, Albus. I do wish she would return, though. I hope nothing has happened to her."

"I am sure she is fine. You will be fine without her for a while longer, too. She will be back before the spell becomes overwhelming for you. Now I think I will read some. I suggest you just rest for now."

Albus put his glasses on and picked up a book from the top of a pile. He had no plans to do any research before lunch, but he could scan a few of the books and see if anything struck him as worthy of further investigation later that day.

Severus reclined on the couch, lazily looking at his book of poetry, turning the pages every so often, till finally he placed it on the floor beside him and stared at the ceiling, eyes glassy and unseeing. Ten minutes later, he was lying on his side, eyes tightly shut, clutching a throw pillow tightly to his chest. Five minutes after that, he was muttering softly to himself and gently rocking back and forth.

Albus was becoming alarmed; surely Minerva would be back soon, but he was disturbed by the spectacle of his young Defence teacher becoming increasingly distressed, knowing there was nothing he could do for him. Still, he would try.

"Here, now, Severus, my boy," he said, approaching the afflicted wizard and perching on the edge of the settee beside him. "Tell me about Minerva, hmm?"

"She is wonderful, Albus, kind and generous. And funny. And she doesn't put up with me. I mean normally. If I'm being a nasty bastard. I'm sorry I'm a nasty bastard, Albus. I wish I were someone she could be proud of." Severus began to weep.

Well, that plan had not worked as Albus had hoped. "You know, Minerva *is* proud of you, Severus. She has told me so. You have done so much, worked so hard. She understands that you can't always help yourself."

Severus's weeping did not diminish, and he began to mutter again. Albus was able to make out only the words "Minerva" and "my love." He rubbed the younger wizard's back and hoped that Minerva would return soon. With relief, he heard the click of the door, and he turned to see Minerva hurrying in and shutting it firmly behind her.

"I am so sorry! I went to see Argus, and then there was an incident in the Charms corridor I couldn't leave and yet I couldn't very well send for you, Albus." She crossed over and took Albus's place beside Severus.

"Hush, now, Severus, I am here."

"I think I will leave you two and return in fifteen minutes, my dear. We can go to lunch then."

Minerva looked up at Albus and held out her hand to him. He took it, and she said, "I'm so sorry, Albus."

"Do not give it another thought. We can talk later." He bent and kissed her forehead before disappearing through the Floo.

"Severus, Severus, sit up, dear thing."

Severus sat and slumped against her. He said hoarsely, "I cannot even speak of my love. I feel ill, Minerva. So ill."

"I know, and I am sorry. Come, come with me, Severus."

She took his hand, and he let her lead him into the bedroom. As much as Minerva disliked the thought of lying on her bed with anyone but Albus, she brought Severus over to it and sat him down.

"Let's just lie together for a bit. Like we did this morning." Minerva toed off her shoes and lay down on top of the bed. "Come here, Severus." She held out her hand, and as he turned, she took his arm and guided him down beside her. When he just lay there trembling, Minerva said, "Do you not want to show me how you feel?"

"Yes, may I, please, Minerva?"

"I would like that," Minerva responded, thinking that, on some level, her statement had been true.

Severus rolled over and placed his arm around Minerva's waist. He lifted his head from the pillow beside hers and looked down at her before tentatively kissing her brow. He drew back again and gazed at her a moment, then he kissed her brow, her temple, her cheek, her jaw. He rested beside her, his head on the pillow next to hers and leaned in to gently kiss her ear and the side of her neck as he raised his hand from her waist to softly caress her face. "You are so beautiful, Minerva. So lovely. So warm and soft."

His caress moved from her face down her neck to her shoulder. He traced the length of her arm until he reached her hand. Severus took her hand in his and sat up to kiss it and hold it to his face, then kiss it again. "I do so love you, Minerva. And I wish I had not been hit by this spell, more for your sake than for mine. I am sorry you must bear my attentions."

"Shh, shh, Severus. None of us would have chosen to have you cursed like this. But as you are so afflicted, I need to ask you not to apologise for the attention you pay me."

"I . . . Albus and I . . . we talked while you were gone." Severus looked down. "I would like to make this all as painless as possible for you." He swallowed and cleared his throat. "If I can bring you any pleasure at all, although I do not claim to have this capacity, I would like to try, if that is agreeable to you, Minerva."

"Yes, that is agreeable to me, Severus," Minerva said softly.

Severus looked up and gazed into her eyes. "I do not know how to bring you pleasure, but I will try . . . with your help, perhaps I will be able to." He took a shuddering breath and let it out in a sigh. "I do wish I could. For I do love you truly. And I always will; even if we defeat this spell and I may never touch you or speak to you of my love again, and it breaks my heart to think of that day, I will still love you."

"I know it, Severus. But you are right; when we defeat this spell, things will be different. You know that you and I . . . you may love me, Severus, but you do see that we are friends, don't you? That our friendship is a good thing, but that it cannot become anything else?"

"Yes, I see that. It is difficult when I am in the full grip of the spell. I envision being with you forever, of just the two of us living somewhere far away from all of the nastiness of the Dark Lord and the Ministry and the annoying dunderheads. But I know it cannot be."

"You probably won't even want such a thing once the spell is lifted, Severus. Well, perhaps you might want to be far away from all the nastiness . . . but I do not believe we could be happy together, and I believe that, unaffected by this spell, you would agree with me."

Tears welled in Severus's eyes. "I believe you because you say it is true, my love, but I wish it were not so, and that I could make you happy."

"You can help see to it that I am not entirely unhappy, Severus. That is a lot." Minerva reached up and gently caressed his face. "You have done very well. And I appreciate that you wish to make this comfortable for me. Thank you."

Severus lay his head on her breast and closed his eyes. "May I rest here a moment, please?"

"Yes. A moment." Minerva stroked his hair gently and remembered the image of the wizard flaying himself alive. She placed her other arm around him. "You will be all right, Severus. You will see."

Author's Note: The Keats poem is called "To *****" and is (obviously) out of copyright, as Keats died in 1821. It may be found in Poems 1817, which has been reprinted in various Keats collections. No doubt you can find such a book on Amazon.com; you may also read the poem in its entirety over at the Gutenberg.org site just search for "Keats."

Five: Coming to Conclusions

Chapter 5 of 16

Minerva comes to certain conclusions about the spell that hit Severus, and Hermione Granger turns up at her door.
Severus finds himself closer to despair as he falls increasingly under the thrall of the spell's imperative.
A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Five: Coming to Conclusions

Lunch went smoothly, Severus entering and leaving on his own, then meeting Minerva back at her rooms afterward. Albus had told them that he had to take care of some neglected school business in the afternoon; he also wanted to check once more on the suite he had set up for them. Minerva continued with her research, although she was growing less hopeful with each passing hour that they would find any cure for Severus that didn't involve her "co-operation." Severus re-sorted the parchments.

Staring at her book as though concentrating on it intently, Minerva finally articulated to herself what she had known all along, but which she simply hadn't wanted to put in such raw, stark terms: she would have to allow Severus to have sex with her. And because of the nature of the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*, it was unlikely to be a quick process, either. The spell would insist that he show her his love and not simply satisfy an animal urge. She had the impression from what Severus had said earlier that he was not particularly well-acquainted with the art of making love to a witch. She had no illusions that Severus was completely sexually inexperienced, but she had never known him to be in a relationship, either. His notion of sex was likely divorced from any concept of love. Minerva hoped that he would have some finesse, though, as long as she had to endure it.

She sighed and closed the book. Looking at the mantle clock, she saw that they had at least a half hour before Severus would have to act on the imperative again.

"Severus, I am tired after the last few days. I am going to go take a nap. If I sleep long, please wake me as soon as you need me."

"I always feel the need for you, Minerva," he replied, "but I will wait until the need grows strong but not too long, I promise. Do not worry about me, my love!"

Minerva went into her bedroom and lay down on the bed. Although she was tired, a nap had only been an excuse to get away from Severus for just a few minutes. It was very wearing to have him constantly with her, and she was growing tired of his constant proclamations of love and adoration. Even when he wasn't in the full thrall of the imperative, he was addressing her with terms of affection, and it seemed to Minerva that he could no longer look at her without appearing as though he was about to begin singing her praises at any moment. Minerva never realised that having someone worship you could be so tiresome!

She cast her mind again to the prospect of submitting to sex with Severus. Enduring sex with him. The prospect almost nauseated Minerva. It could be worse, she supposed. Some near-stranger or mere acquaintance could have been hit with the spell and been affected in the same way. She had read of instances in which that had happened. On the other hand, she might never have had to see such a person again. Severus, however, would be teaching beside her for at least the next several months. Given that he held the Defence position, Minerva didn't know precisely how much longer he would last, but probably till the end of the school year. And if Severus simply returned to teaching Potions at the end of it, she might have to live and teach with the wizard for a good many years to come.

Albus had told her he didn't want her merely to endure it. Truth be told, she wasn't sure she did, either. It would be better to have the act be something other than unpleasant. And Severus had expressed the wish to bring her pleasure, although he hadn't sounded particularly confident in his ability to do so. Despite the fact that the spell seemed to make him averse to causing her any discomfort, Minerva was not convinced that his previous sexual experience, whatever that was, combined with his professed ignorance of how to bring her pleasure, might not cause him to unintentionally be rough with her. If he was concentrating on bringing her enjoyment, however, he might at least succeed in not hurting her.

Minerva thought back on the lovers she had had before Albus. If this were forty years ago, she would have far fewer qualms about having sex with Severus although she would never have simply leapt into bed with him the very afternoon he had been struck with the spell. But it had been so many years since she had been with anyone but Albus that, completely apart from the fact that she did not want to betray Albus by having sex with someone else, Minerva wasn't sure if she *could* make love with anyone else. She was getting older; she and Albus had a very special relationship and a still-active love life, but her body was not what it once was. Even if she *wanted* to enjoy sex with some other wizard, *could* she? It was peculiar enough to contemplate that a younger wizard possessed carnal desire for her, but to imagine herself in the throes of passion with some young wizard? That was certainly an incongruous thought. It was quite easy for her to let go and react with abandon when Albus made love to her, but it seemed slightly absurd to imagine losing herself in passion as some younger wizard made love to her.

Not just "some" younger wizard, Minerva thought with a sigh. Severus. Severus, who not only loved her, but who lusted for her. He hadn't even been aware of it, either. How very peculiar that he should have walked the halls of Hogwarts for so many years, apparently loving her and being physically attracted to her, and yet never knowing it himself. Severus had not believed they were even friends, although Minerva herself was sure that had she ever asked an important favour of him, he would have obliged her with some grumbling and a mention of her debt to him, but he would have done it.

As Minerva was contemplating their friendship, there was a light knock on the door and it opened slightly.

"Minerva? May I come in?"

"Of course, Severus. I should get up now, anyway."

"Please don't; you have been working far too hard, my love, and you have your ordeal tonight. You must be rested for that."

Minerva had almost forgotten the potion she was to take. Well, she'd deal with one unpleasantness at a time. "You may come here, Severus." She rolled onto her side and faced him, propping herself up on one elbow. "I appreciate your allowing me to rest. It has been a trying few days."

"I am very, very sorry, Minerva. I will try to make the coming hours and days as comfortable for you as possible. You have been so good to me." He sat on the bed by her feet. "I love you dearly and truly . . ."

Minerva sighed as she listened to yet another long-winded proclamation of love. Unable to bear it any longer, she finally reached up and pulled him down toward her. "Just touch me or something, Severus. I think I am a bit too sleepy to listen to you right now," she said, trying to be diplomatic.

Severus took in a breath and let it out slowly before kicking off his shoes and lying beside her. Minerva lay on her back and looked up at him as he pushed himself up with one arm and hovered over her. Lips slightly parted, he began to trace a line from her eye down her cheek, around her jaw, then to her mouth. With his index finger, he lightly brushed Minerva's lips. "Such sweet lips, sweeter than the bud of any rose."

He gently caressed Minerva's neck and, with just his fingertips, softly swept the exposed skin of her chest before returning his touch to her cheek. Severus leaned closer to Minerva and murmured, "My sweet," before kissing her temple, the apple of her cheek, then trailing soft, whispered kisses along her cheek and jaw to just the corner of her mouth. His lips moved to her other cheek then. As Minerva moved her head in response to a tender caress of her chin, Severus began to kiss her neck, pausing to repeat his kisses at her soft pulse points, until he reached the hollow of her throat. Caught up in the moment, Severus moved to embrace her, placing his hand between her shoulders and lifting her slightly in order to better access the soft, creamy skin of her neck and chest.

Minerva had vowed to relax and attempt to appreciate Severus's attentions, but she was nonetheless surprised by her body's response to his gentle, intimate touches intimate but not yet completely intrusive. As his lips moved, feather-light, from the hollow of her neck back to her pulse point then down again, proceeding to the soft skin just above her breasts, Minerva involuntarily gasped. The sensation that rippled through her was slight but sudden, and she was surprised by the tingle Severus had been able to elicit.

Severus began to raise his head, but Minerva, with eyes half-open, simply raised a hand to caress his cheek and comb his hair back. A relaxed, blissful expression on his face, Severus resumed his attentions to her chest and neck before moving back up to her ear, which, to Minerva's gasped astonishment, he first kissed, then licked, tracing the shell of her ear before flicking his tongue into her ear then suckling her earlobe.

Swallowing hard, Minerva pushed Severus from her. "I think that should be quite enough for now, Severus." She was aware that she must be slightly flushed.

"I am sorry, Minerva." Severus sat up, looking somewhat ill-at-ease. "You do need to stop me. Once I begin, it is as though I am in a fog; I am aware only of you and what I am doing. I would not think to stop."

"It's all right, Severus. This should 'recharge' you for a while, shouldn't it?" Minerva asked as nonchalantly as she could.

"Yes." He hesitated. "Minerva? Did I . . . was I able . . . did I bring you . . . any pleasure?" he whispered, flustered by his own question.

"You did very well, Severus. For a man who expressed doubts about his ability to do that, you did very well, indeed. Thank you. I appreciate your thinking of me."

Severus smiled. "I think I actually feel better doing it now touching and kissing you since I am trying to bring you pleasure. But I wasn't sure I was succeeding." He blushed, and Minerva thought he looked very much like a schoolboy, but a schoolboy quite unlike the one he had actually been. It would be something of a shock when he was back to being his usual acerbic self.

A short time later, Minerva had curled up for a genuine nap, Severus having returned to the sitting room to do whatever it was he was doing out there, when he suddenly burst back in. "Minerva! Minerva! Wake up! There's someone at your door! The knight says it's a student."

Grumbling, Minerva slipped on her shoes, directing Severus to stay behind in her bedroom, and walked out to see what needed her attention. Hopefully, it wasn't a problem in Gryffindor, or she might have to leave. Although Severus's attentions had been rather extensive this last time, she didn't know how long he could wait for her to return.

She opened her door to find sixth-year Gryffindor prefect Hermione Granger standing there. Lovely. Minerva liked Hermione she reminded her somewhat of herself at that age but the girl did tend to be verbose and persistent. She might not be easily got rid of.

"Miss Granger, good-afternoon. May I help you?"

"I hope so, Professor. I have been looking for the Headmaster; he's not in his office, and I have checked the library. I didn't know where else to look. I thought you might know where he was."

"The Headmaster is quite busy today, Miss Granger. Is there something I can help you with?" asked Minerva, hoping Hermione would say "no."

"Well, no, but I really do need to see the Headmaster."

"He is not available at the moment, as I have said. It will have to wait."

A strained look passed over Hermione's face. "Well, then . . . do you know where Professor Snape might be? I looked in his office, then I hung about the dungeons for a bit not recommended for a Gryffindor! but I couldn't find him, either."

"And what might you need to see the Head of Slytherin about, Miss Granger, that you could not discuss with me?" Minerva had a feeling she knew why it was that Hermione wanted to see Severus, but Albus had never confirmed to the girl that Severus had been affected by the spell although, bright as she was, Hermione must have surmised that from the Headmaster's interest in it and Minerva thought it prudent not to bring it up.

"Just a problem with a Slytherin, that's all."

"I am the Deputy Headmistress as well as your Head of House, Miss Granger!" Minerva said sharply.

Hermione shifted uneasily. "I don't know if Professor Dumbledore told you or not, but a Slytherin was accidentally hit by a spell a few days ago. I just had something I needed to tell him about it, that's all. But if he's busy . . . I guess I'll have to wait. I'll go sit by the gargyle until he returns."

"Oh, just let the girl in, Minerva." Severus's voice came from behind her. He had evidently been listening from the bedroom. "Better that than have her wandering the halls looking for Albus."

Hermione's eyes widened when she heard Snape's voice, but when Minerva opened the door wide enough to permit her entry, she quickly stepped through. "Professor Snape! Are you all right, sir?"

"Just bloody marvellous, Miss Granger. As you have no doubt guessed, or you would not be hounding the Headmaster and me," Severus grumped.

Minerva smiled. He sounded almost like himself, although his tone was milder.

"Miss Granger," Minerva began, "you may have deduced that I am aware of the unfortunate spell that Miss Parkinson cast. You might as well tell us what you came to say."

Hermione hesitated. "I think it would be better if I told the Headmaster, Professor. No offense. It has nothing to do with you."

"Miss Granger! You will show Professor McGonagall more respect, do you understand me?"

"Hush, Severus. Why don't you go . . . do something, hmm?"

Hermione looked around her as if seeing the scattered books, parchments, and scrolls for the first time. She looked at Snape, then at her Head of House, then back at Snape. Her mouth formed a round "o."

"Have a seat, Miss Granger. I see that you have come to certain conclusions." Hermione nodded at Minerva. "I would prefer not to discuss those conclusions, however. Nonetheless, you can see that it might behoove you to tell me what it was you wanted to say to Professor Dumbledore. I will be happy to relay your message. And if you simply wanted to see Professor Snape and reassure yourself of his health and well-being, you have seen him and can rest assured that he is in capable hands."

Hermione glanced behind her, where Severus had seated himself at the table and was going through a stack of parchments. Looking back at the Deputy Headmistress, Hermione said, "I am glad to see that you and Professor Dumbledore are taking care of him, but I can't tell you why I need to see him."

"And what would you do if the Headmaster were indisposed?"

"I suppose you would be Acting Headmistress. I would have to consider telling you *if* Professor Dumbledore indisposed, Professor?"

Minerva sighed. "No, and he will be returning here at some point this afternoon, but you cannot stay here. Perhaps you could leave him a note?"

"No . . . I will come back, then. In an hour?"

Hermione certainly was persistent. Minerva was becoming impatient with her. "Miss Granger, as I "

"Oh, let your cub stay, Minerva. Unless it would disturb you. It's too late, anyway. She's seen me here. She's not a complete dunderhead. Better to have her here where we can keep an eye on her." Severus sounded resigned. "Unless you want to *Oblivate* her. No, didn't think so. Better keep her here, then." He sighed and turned back to the colourful list he had been scrutinising.

Hermione stood up and turned to face Snape. "Professor Snape, I am sorry about your current . . . state. I am not entirely sure what is going on, although I have a few ideas. However, if you think you need to keep an eye on me to ensure that I will not tell anyone that you are here, let me please reassure you that I would not dream of telling anyone, no more than I have told anyone about the incident in which you were hit by Pansy's spell. And if you are worried that I might tell Harry and Ron about any of it, I haven't and I wouldn't."

Severus looked at her with a slightly blank expression, then he snorted and turned back to his parchments.

"Well, if you are staying, would you care for some tea?" Minerva asked. "A biscuit, perhaps?"

"No, thank you. But . . . maybe I could help?" Hermione gestured at the books.

"That's all right. We have reached the final stages of our research. You're welcome to read whilst we wait for the Headmaster, however."

Severus looked up at Minerva when she said that, but apparently deciding that the love of his life would not do anything she shouldn't, he returned to his parchment-shuffling and note-taking.

An hour later, and Minerva and Hermione were sipping tea and munching on ginger newts. Minerva had her feet up and was leafing through a large, yellowing folio of handwritten notes taken by some witch about one hundred years before, and Hermione was lounging on the settee reading the book with lurid descriptions of people who had been afflicted by the *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus* and other similar spells. Minerva wasn't sure she was old enough to be reading about such things, but after what the girl had been through in recent years, Minerva wasn't going to stop her. After all, she had been younger than Hermione when she had developed an almost obsessive interest in the nasty effects of curses on the human body. Although the full-plate picture of a wizard castrating himself might be a bit much . . .

Minerva became aware that Severus was beginning to become agitated, jiggling, running his hands through his hair, chewing a quill to shreds but what was she to do?

"Severus, should we ask Miss Granger to return later?"

"What?" he answered, glassy-eyed. "No. No. I'm fine."

"You're *not* fine, Severus." Minerva turned to Hermione. A serious, almost grim, expression on her face, she said, "Hermione, I hope you will excuse us for a moment. The Headmaster may return; you may tell him that we are . . . next door."

Hermione nodded solemnly and tried to avert her gaze as Minerva went over to Severus, gently took his elbow, and led him into her bedroom. When the door shut behind the two, Hermione shuddered slightly, then went back to her book.

When Minerva and Severus returned to the sitting room less than ten minutes later, they found Albus and Hermione sitting together on the sofa, drinking tea and eating biscuits.

"Hello, my dear! Severus," Albus greeted them cheerily. "Hermione has been taking good care of me; we've been having tea and biscuits and a very interesting chat."

"The girl wouldn't tell us why she was here, Albus. She was *most* rude to the Deputy Headmistress." Severus seemed fixated on what to him was Hermione's blatant disrespect for Minerva. He scowled at the young Gryffindor.

"Severus, my boy, don't pout. It's most unbecoming. Hermione had a perfectly legitimate reason not to share with you the reason she was looking for me." He stood and went to Minerva. Taking her hand, he said, "I am most sorry to have to abandon you once more, my dear. I need to go with Hermione right now. I would explain, but I believe time may be of the essence. I will tell you both all about it when I return. In the meantime, might I suggest that Severus pay a visit to Slytherin House, just to make an appearance. Find some excuse to speak with one of the younger ones, I think, Severus. Don't want any older ones noticing anything . . . *unusual* in your behaviour. Minerva can send for you if you haven't returned here within the margin of safety, hmm?"

Minerva sighed and nodded. Severus looked grim, but left for Slytherin, casting only one backward glance at Minerva before closing the door behind him.

"Miss Granger, could you wait in the hall a moment, please," Minerva directed.

When Hermione was safely in the corridor, Minerva hugged Albus tightly. "I wish I knew what you were up to, but I just needed to give you a quick kiss before you left,

Albus."

He smiled at her, eyes twinkling. "So where is it, then?"

"It's yours for the taking," Minerva answered, leaning back, arms around his neck.

"I think I may do just that." Albus pulled Minerva toward him and kissed her once, softly, on the lips. He looked at her a moment, then kissed her again, beginning gently, then becoming more impassioned. Suddenly he winced and pulled back. "Sorry, my dear. The hand again."

"I'm sorry, Albus." She took his right hand in her own hands and raised it to her mouth, kissing it gently.

Albus kissed her once more on the cheek before turning and leaving to meet Hermione.

Minerva sighed when, forty-five minutes later, she heard the door open. Thinking it was Severus, she put a neutral expression on her face and continued reading, hoping he wouldn't need her attention just yet.

"I know I haven't been gone long, but a greeting would have been nice, my dear."

Minerva looked up, a smile lighting her face. "Oh! I thought it was Severus." She accepted Albus's kiss, and when he led her to the settee, she didn't hesitate to curl up against him.

"So, are you going to tell me what all that was about?"

"I will, in due time. However, since I don't want to repeat myself, I thought we would wait for Severus."

"Mmm," agreed Minerva laconically. "I'm so tired of all this, Albus. And it's only Sunday. If it weren't for the fact that it doesn't work to release the spell, I'd be tempted to just take a dose of Draught of the Living Death right now and let Severus have his way with me." Unfortunately, the spell required the object of affection to be awake and aware at the time of final consummation, as many a witch and wizard had previously discovered to their woe.

Albus shuddered. "That's a dreadful thought, Minerva. Worse than the other."

"What '*other*,' Albus? We've been pussy-footing around this long enough. We might as well be frank about it. I am coming to terms with it not fully, of course but you and I both know that, if there is no other solution, Severus has to have sex with me. And it has to fulfill the requirements of the spell's imperative. No five-minute quickie." Albus's response was to hold her more tightly. "And," Minerva continued, "I think I'd honestly feel more used at the end of it, more *degraded*, if it were just a five-minute quickie.

Once I acknowledged the reality of the situation, I began to understand better exactly how important it is, not for Severus, but for *me*, if I don't merely submit to it. You were very wise to have begun raising this issue for me as early as you did, Albus. It will give me time to grow used to the idea, come to terms with it, and maybe come out of this with some of my own dignity and sense of self-worth intact."

Albus kissed her head. "I am glad, Minerva," he said softly. "I have been so worried about you. And when you asked me if I would have you do it even if you didn't want to . . . it almost broke my heart."

"I am sorry, Albus. I didn't really believe you would. I just had to hear you say it. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Do not be. I should have been clearer about that from the beginning. But that it might ever enter your head, after all these years, that I would lightly and willingly hand you to another man, even under these circumstances . . ."

"I didn't *really* believe that just had the *tiniest* bit of worry, that's all. It's simply that this is such a bizarre situation . . . the fact that it is Severus only complicates matters."

"I know, my dear, I know; and it's all right, I understand. Where is Severus? Has he been back already and gone out again?"

"Oh! I should have Flooed his office ten minutes ago to ask him to return!"

Minerva was just gathering a pinch of Floo-Powder to call Severus when the wizard himself Flooed through and stepped into the sitting room. Other than a slight tremor and a dazed look on his face, he didn't seem worse for the extended trip from Minerva's side. Nonetheless, he nodded at Albus, then turned to Minerva and asked her if they could go into the other room for a few minutes.

"In a moment, Severus. How are you feeling?" Minerva asked.

"Not well. But I will wait." He flopped into a chair.

"Albus wanted to tell us about his outing with Hermione."

Albus looked from Minerva to Severus and back again. "It can wait, Minerva."

"But I am curious, and *you did* say you only wanted to wait until you could tell us both at once. We're both here now, as you can see."

"Yes, but only one of you is fully present." Albus gestured toward Severus, who was digging his fingernails into his thighs and had begun to sweat. "Don't worry, my dear, I am not going anywhere. I will tell you all about it when you're through. However, no need to retire to the other room, Severus. I think I will make us some tea. I'll just be in the kitchen, my dear," he said, rising and giving Minerva a kiss.

"You don't need to leave, Albus," Severus croaked. "I can." He sighed and looked down. "Not alone, though," he whispered almost inaudibly.

Minerva sighed. "All right, Severus. Why don't we just spend a little time out here, and Albus can go fetch us all some tea." She held out her hand to him as Albus stood and left for Minerva's tiny kitchen.

"I'm sorry, Minerva." Instead of sitting beside her on the sofa, as Minerva had intended him to do, Severus knelt before her and took one of her hands in both of his. "You are sick of me. I know it. I knew this time would come, no matter how hard I tried to please you," he said, his voice raspy with tears. "Won't you *please* have Albus brew me that potion? It would free you from my attentions. I do not want to continue to cause you such discomfort." Tears rolled down his face and fell on Minerva's lap.

"No, that wouldn't be right, Severus." Minerva took out her handkerchief and wiped his tears from his face. She tried to grin at him. "I told you this morning that I am just a cranky old witch. I am sorry if I have been impatient with you this afternoon. I am tired, Severus, and not just of you. I really need a nap this afternoon, and I haven't managed to get one yet. Come, don't cry."

Severus buried his head in her lap and wept. "You are too good, Minerva. Too good for me. Too good to have to endure this."

"Shush, Severus. I don't want to hear you talk like that. And you have done very well, trying to make the situation comfortable for me. And you have done quite well in your effort to " Minerva swallowed " bring me pleasure. I would appreciate it if you would continue."

Minerva held out her handkerchief to him, and he took it, wiping his face. "I am sorry, Minerva. I got your robes all wet. I would dry them, but my magic is a little shaky; I'd probably either make them wetter or set them on fire!" Severus tried to smile, as though he had been joking, but Minerva was alarmed. She knew that a wizard's magic became increasingly impaired as the spell's hold tightened, but she wasn't prepared for Severus's ability to be weakened so soon. Nonetheless, she smiled back.

"I'm sure a few tears won't hurt them, Severus. Now, Albus will have our tea soon. Why don't you . . ." Minerva pushed his hair back from his face.

Severus kissed her inner wrist and closed his eyes before proceeding to kiss each finger in turn, then laying his head back in Minerva's lap and snuggling closer to her, kissing her thigh several times through her robes. As his face relaxed and his trembling subsided completely, Minerva's own eyes filled with tears. She would have to be more patient with him. He would remember all of this when they were through. She did not want him to remember grovelling to her, begging her to let him die; she did not want him to remember any reluctance or distaste on her part. The Severus she knew was a proud man not always, or even often, pleasant but he was proud, and he had done Albus great service in his life. In fact, Albus would be dead now, if it hadn't been for Severus's help earlier that summer. She could at least help him come out of this with some of his self-esteem intact.

A few minutes later, Albus returned to the sitting room, a tea tray with two teapots hovering in front of him, to find Severus sitting in a chair and Minerva on the sofa, waiting for him.

He smiled brightly at the two. "Tea?"

Minerva waved her wand and cleared some books from the coffee table; the tea tray settled down on it.

"Two pots, Albus?"

"Mmhm. A nice chamomile and catnip infusion for you, my dear, and a pot of Darjeeling for Severus and me unless you would prefer the tisane, Severus? There should be enough."

"No, thank you, Albus. I believe Minerva has a right to have something for herself without having to share it with me," he said with a sigh.

Not responding to Severus's statement, Albus asked, "Would you be mother, Severus, and pour?"

"Of course, Albus." Severus straightened. "Would you like milk, Minerva?"

"No, thank you, Severus. Just a tiny touch of honey would be nice."

Severus fixed Minerva's cup, then fixed Albus's tea the way he knew he liked it milky with a lump of sugar. He poured himself a cup, black. After tasting it, he added a lump of sugar, sipped it again, and smiled slightly.

After they had all drunk a little tea, Minerva turned to Albus. "Could you tell us what it was that Hermione wanted?"

"Mmm," he replied as he took another swallow of tea. "Apparently a Slytherin had a crisis of conscience." Severus snorted but said nothing. "Hermione found Miss Parkinson in the library in fruitless search of a book that would tell her more about the spell. When she saw Hermione, she was apparently under the false impression that Hermione had removed all of the pertinent texts from the library, since Draco had told her that he had seen her with such books on Friday. Hermione managed to convince her that the books she had found had not been useful and that she had reshelfed them. At that point, Pansy attempted to persuade her to help her find those books so she could read them for herself. Apparently, Miss Parkinson had reread her own book, the one from which she had originally obtained the spell, and discovered a few things about the *Adfectus* that frightened her. Hermione reluctantly told her she had found a few books that were informative and that she would retrieve them for her from her dormitory. She arranged to meet Miss Parkinson back in an isolated corner of the library later this afternoon. Hermione thought that if Pansy were that concerned about the spell, she might be willing to discuss it with me."

This time, Severus's snort turned into a barked laugh. "And you two no doubt learned that Miss Granger was incorrect about that and now Parkinson is certainly even more suspicious about the effect the spell had on me, if *you* were asking about it."

"You are actually incorrect, Severus. Miss Parkinson is not an altruistic person, but she did fear for what she might have done to you. To make a long story short, she agreed to allow me to use Legilimency on her once I had promised that I would avoid looking at any memories that didn't have to do with the spell and she trusted me, Severus," Albus added. "She no doubt thinks I am a crazy old Gryffindor who doesn't know how to take advantage of an opportunity."

"You are not that, but you *are* too honourable to make such a promise and not abide by it," replied Severus, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Mmm, perhaps. Although what I might think relevant to the spell might be somewhat different from her own notions. As we had agreed, as soon as I was through, I *Obliviated* her and planted the suggestion that I had asked her about something entirely unrelated to the *Adfectus*, and I left. Hermione then returned, handed the girl a few of the books that I deemed were safe for her to have, and that was that."

"So what did you learn?" asked Minerva.

"It appears that it was a genuine accident and Severus was not the victim of an ambush. Miss Parkinson found the book on the shelves of her parents' library this summer. She was not particularly diligent in reading the particulars about each spell and stopped reading whenever it was evident that a spell was of no use to her. When she came upon the class of *Adfectus* spells in the book, however, she skimmed through them until she found the one that the text initially described as 'the most useful' of all *Adfectus* spells. Once she'd read through the incantation, the wand movement, and the intent required, however, she failed to read the remainder of the description. She is relieved that she didn't hit Draco, but is concerned about you, Severus. I think it would be good if you put in an appearance in the library before dinner I planted the additional suggestion that she would not want to leave the library until it was time for dinner. It certainly couldn't hurt her to study a bit longer on a Sunday afternoon."

Minerva chuckled; Severus quirked a smile, but looked uneasy. "What should I tell her, Albus? I am so angry with her, I am not sure I can have a civilised conversation with her."

"Tell her, perhaps, that you are having some trouble sleeping, but that beyond that, you haven't noticed any untoward signs. Remind her that not everyone is affected by the curse in the same way "

"But Albus, despite what Parkinson believed when she cast the spell, everyone who is hit by the spell is affected by it it's just that some poor devils walk around for weeks before they encounter their true love and the spell is completed."

"Yes, and the symptoms of that are insomnia, lack of appetite, irritability, and the like which is so like your own usual behaviour as to be almost indistinguishable from it. If Miss Parkinson can believe that your true love is not only unknown to you, but that she does not reside at Hogwarts, your trip for potion ingredients can serve a secondary purpose. When you 'return' from it, you can assign Miss Parkinson further detention. Imply that the spell completed while you were away from the castle and suggest whatever else you might need to in order to preserve your dignity and your status."

"She'll want to know who it is, Headmaster and even if she doesn't ask, word might get back to the Dark Lord. She's sure to tell Draco and others."

"You must say and do whatever necessary in order to make it clear that she would be extremely ill-advised to do that."

"I wish we could just feed her to the Giant Squid and be done with it," Severus grumbled.

"The Giant Squid does not eat students, Severus," Albus admonished mildly.

Minerva laughed. "If it makes you feel any better, Severus, I saw Argus this morning, and Pansy will be spending this evening cleaning the Owlery on her hands and knees with a toothbrush. She will do that every night until it's completely clean. Cleaning the Owlery will count as only one night's detention no matter how long it takes Argus

believes those are your instructions, I hope you don't mind so after she has finished that, she will still have four nights of detention remaining."

"But there are owls in there all day and all night in between cleanings, it will just get filthy again," Severus said, somewhat perplexed.

"Precisely." Minerva gave a wicked grin. "It will take her a few nights before she realises that if she doesn't finish it in one go, she will have to come back every evening for the rest of the year! She may eventually manage to clean the entire Owlery in one night, but only by spending hours and hours crawling around in owl droppings."

Severus began to chuckle, then to chortle, then to hoot with laughter. When he finally caught his breath, he looked at Minerva, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. "You truly are wonderful, Minerva. And I wish I weren't under the effect of this spell so you would believe me." He smiled at her in admiration.

Albus was smiling as well; it was good to see Severus laugh a genuine and non-hysterical laugh, although he hadn't found Minerva's altered detention quite as amusing as Severus had. On the other hand, the girl's irresponsibility had cost all three of them dearly, so he was not about to chide Minerva for her somewhat cruel punishment.

Minerva looked over at Albus. "I know you likely don't approve, Albus, but if I had my way, the girl would be expelled that curse has the potential to be deadly, and you know my feelings on such things. I also would have taken every point in Slytherin's hour glass, if it weren't that it would punish Severus as well."

Albus patted her knee. "It's fine. Probably quite apt. And very Slytherin just the sort of thing that Severus himself might have come up with." He looked at the two. "Now, I realise that Severus could probably go a bit longer before spending more time with you, my dear, but I would like him to go up to the library before dinner, and I need to explain to you how to administer the potion, what to expect, and so on. So, Severus," he continued, "come give my . . . Minerva a kiss and get going. I can also tell that she's in dire need of a nap."

Severus stood, looking a bit nervous, but he went over to Minerva and, as Albus watched, he raised her hand to his lips.

"I doubt that will hold you very long, Severus. Go ahead. I did hear everything from the kitchen, you know."

Severus dropped Minerva's hand and blushed. "I'm sorry, Albus."

"It's the spell. You have never behaved this way toward Minerva before, and I have no reason to believe you will be likely to once you are released from it. So go ahead."

Severus stood there a moment before awkwardly bending toward Minerva, closing his eyes, and kissing her cheek. He kissed her cheek twice as the spell's imperative urged him further. He moved to cup her face in one hand and place his other on her shoulder, then kissed the side of her face and her neck. He caressed her face and throat, fingers trailing their way down to Minerva's chest until she caught his hand and gently eased him away. Severus's face was relaxed as he straightened, but when he caught sight of Albus sitting there beside Minerva, he flushed and looked away.

"I'll just Floo to my rooms, then, and go to the library. I will return here via the Headmaster's office in about an hour, then we can go to dinner." He backed up, went over to Minerva's fireplace, and left with the burst of green flame.

"I'm sorry, Albus," Minerva whispered when he had gone.

"I actually needed to see that. I am not entirely sure why, myself, except perhaps to see that he is being gentle with you. But I also know that you have had to put up with more than I; I cannot share your burden directly, but perhaps I can offer you my support."

"I know I have that, my love," Minerva said, leaning back against him and curling her feet beneath her. "Your love, your support, your understanding . . . you have been far better in this situation than I believe I could have been if our roles were reversed."

"Yes, I'm sure that seeing Severus kiss and caress me would be quite disturbing," Albus joked. Minerva elbowed him lightly in the ribs, but she smiled.

"So, when do we get to see this suite of rooms, Albus?"

"I will bring Severus by on our way to dinner. If you don't mind waiting until after your trip to the infirmary, that might be best, given what time it is now and your need for a nap. Besides, you already are familiar with them although they will appear somewhat different from the last time you saw them."

"Really? But "

"The rooms I used when you were a student here actually, until I became Headmaster. I believe you visited them a few times during your Animagus training."

"Yes . . . funny, I could never figure out where they were I wandered around outside the castle one day, looking up from a spot I knew I had been able to see from your guest room, but I couldn't figure out where they were. It seemed particularly odd because there were windows in the hallway outside your rooms, as well, and yet I couldn't find those windows from the other side of the castle, either in fact, it seemed impossible that those windows even existed; they should have been inside the castle, the way I figured it."

"Mmm. It is complicated. It's a kind of a . . . bridge within the castle, but it's also part of Gryffindor tower, although it probably didn't feel that way to you. Anyway, it hasn't been used since I vacated it forty years ago, and it is just as unplottable now as it was then, so perfect for our needs. I still won't be able to give Harry his map back, though, since he would notice that you aren't in the Hospital Wing, and we can't have that."

"No, that would create even more difficulties than we already have. Speaking of the Hospital Wing, you were going to tell me about the potion and what I should expect."

"Yes, and I'm afraid you will be very uncomfortable from it. I don't like doing this, but it meets our requirements. You have to have an illness requiring you to remain in seclusion and receive no visitors, and this fits the bill. The muscle spasms, which I mentioned in Severus's presence, will actually be quite violent it will appear that you are having seizures, but it will only effect your muscles. There will be no seizure activity in your brain. To make certain that the potion did exactly what we wanted it to and no more and to reassure myself that it would not be unbearable for you, my dear I took some of the potion myself this afternoon, which was one reason I was gone for so long. Do not worry! I did it in the infirmary under Poppy's watchful eye. You will feel as though you have severe muscle cramps. There will be some nausea, as well, although it should be fairly mild if you react as I did. You will definitely sweat very profusely, so be sure to drink plenty of water before going to dinner so you don't dehydrate yourself. It's unpleasant, but it will pass, my dear."

"And what exotic illness am I supposed to have contracted?"

"Febrile contagious magical distemper of the spasmodic type."

"Sounds unpleasant."

"Very. Usually survivable, although it is highly contagious. Poppy will unfortunately have to examine everyone who has been in close contact with you in the last twenty-four hours to maintain the illusion that your illness is genuine. Fortunately, other than your outing this morning, you have spent most of the last day here in your rooms. There is also a treatment for it that calls for some rather exotic ingredients -- not banned, merely rare. "

"How long will I be sick? I don't mean from the potion, although I would like to know that, too, but how long does this illness generally last?"

"Seven to fourteen days, with the contagious period lasting five to ten days. You should feel the worst of the potion's effects for twenty minutes to a half hour. After that, you will feel slightly wobbly for another fifteen or twenty minutes nothing that can't be cured by a sherbet lemon or two!"

"All right." Minerva sighed. "I can see why you didn't tell Severus about this, although I do think he should be forewarned so he doesn't have a fit in front of the entire school. I will talk to him, reassure him."

"You still have plenty of time for a good nap before Severus returns, my dear."

"Come with me?"

"Will you sleep if I do?"

"Much better than without you," Minerva replied with a smile.

Forty-five minutes later, Severus tapped tentatively on the partially-open door of Minerva's bedroom. He peeked in to see Minerva sound asleep, Albus wrapped around her, his right leg hooked around hers, his right arm thrown across her, his blackened hand resting on a small pillow by Minerva's chest. Neither of them moved, and Severus backed away from the room and went and lay down on Minerva's settee, bending his knees and curling up in order to fit his length on the small sofa. Fifteen minutes later, the soft glow of Albus's *Tempus* alarm woke the two sleepers.

Minerva stretched and cancelled the Tempus. "Albus? What time is it? Shouldn't Severus be back?"

"Mmm. It's quarter to five. I thought if he returned before we woke, he'd come get you."

Minerva padded in her stocking feet out to the sitting room. "Severus! How long have you been back?"

Severus looked at her with glazed eyes. He was drooling slightly. "M'nerva. M'nerva. Oh, M'nerva." He raised a shaky hand to touch her skirt, then dropped it limply. "M'nerva, m' love," he murmured. "M'nerva, M'nerva."

Minerva sat down beside him, pushing his knees away from his body in order to make some space for herself. She leaned over and embraced the trembling wizard, pulling him to her. "You must not do this to yourself. Why did you not wake me?"

Severus turned his head into Minerva's embrace, and his reply was lost in the folds of her robes. After a moment, he raised an arm and curled it around her, then the other arm. He stroked her back and his trembling began to subside. He kissed the soft skin of her throat and chest. "My love, my sweet love," he whispered, his kisses moving across her upper chest then trailing down toward her breast. "So sweet and wonderful. My love, my true love," he murmured against her skin.

Minerva levered herself into a sitting position, releasing Severus from her embrace. He let her go as she pushed away from him.

"If it weren't for the fact that you are suffering from this spell, Severus Snape, I believe I would shake you. What on earth were you thinking, waiting so long? You were completely incoherent!"

"I saw you were asleep," he said weakly but articulately. "I didn't want to wake you. And . . . Albus was there. I do not belong here, Minerva. I know that. I did not want to wake you and ask you to leave his welcome embrace for my unwelcome one. And I could not lie beside you as I did this morning, not with his arm around you. I may be a bastard, Minerva, and the *Adfectus* may have a strong hold on me, but I can at least manage that much to choose to allow you, whom I love so, to sleep in the arms of one whom you love. I am grateful for all you have done and all you continue to do, but, except when I am completely overtaken by the spell, I am aware that you do not love me."

Minerva sighed. "Next time, wake us both, Severus. Let *us* choose as well, all right? And as I told you before, *do* love you, Severus. Just not the way you love me. I am your friend, Severus, and so is Albus. We do not want all of what we have done over the last couple days to be for naught and have you go mad before our eyes!"

Severus nodded and relaxed, looking up at her. "You are very beautiful, Minerva. I could gaze at you all day long and never tire of seeing your beautiful face." He took Minerva's hand and raised it to his lips. "Thank you, Minerva."

Minerva shook her head. "What are we to do with you, Severus Snape? It seems you are as self-destructive now as you are when you are yourself."

"Self-destructive?" he asked, furrowing his brow. "I am selfish and mean, Minerva. Not self-destructive."

"Perhaps you may be somewhat selfish, but you certainly have a knack for choosing to do what is bad for you." She sighed. "Come, now, sit up. We need to talk, then Albus is going to take you on a little tour."

Severus sat up and Minerva shifted to sit beside him.

"Severus, earlier this afternoon, Albus took a dose of the potion that I am to take this evening. As you have seen, he is perfectly fine, and will be perfectly fine, too. I do not want you to be alarmed when I begin to have the muscle spasms. It will look much worse that it really is, and you have to remember that. And keep in mind that I will be perfectly well in a half hour."

"I will remember that. Albus said that he planned to have me carry you to the infirmary. Is that still what we are going to do?"

"Yes. That way you will be able to care for me. Even though it will all be staged, it will be very gallant of you, and I will feel safer taking the potion knowing you are there and that you will be carrying me to the Hospital Wing."

"All right. I can do that. Could you possibly take the potion early in the meal, though? It will be easier for me to react rationally if I haven't had to wait too long . . ."

"I had planned on that. Albus said I might feel mildly nauseous from the potion, so I think I will have a little bite of something light and mild to eat before we go to dinner, that way I'll have something on my stomach, but nothing that might make me feel sicker. I think this is roast beef and Yorkshire pudding night, too. I *do* love Yorkshire pudding, but I doubt it would mix well with the potion!"

There was a knock at the door, and the knight came into the landscape that hung above Minerva's fireplace to announce that the student was back. Albus, who had been standing in the bedroom doorway listening to Minerva prepare Severus for her staged illness, said, "I will get it, my dear. I asked Miss Granger to return at five o'clock. It is good to see that she is punctual."

Six: An Apology and a Potion

Chapter 6 of 16

New torments afflict Severus as he continues to suffer from the spell. Hermione Granger visits again, at Albus's

invitation, and Severus comes to a realisation. Minerva undergoes her own trials as she proceeds with their plan and takes the potion.

A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Six: An Apology and a Potion

Albus let Hermione in and closed the door behind her. "Severus, Miss Granger has something she wishes to say to you."

"Professor Snape, I wanted to personally tell you how sorry I am that this happened. I just keep thinking that I am partly to blame. If I had only been able to stop the argument sooner, or if I had not said what I did to Pansy that made her think to cast the spell on Draco, you would not be in this situation. I am very sorry, sir," Hermione said seriously.

Severus looked at the girl. "'Sorry' does not fix anything, Miss Granger." His attempt at an acerbic tone degenerated into one of resignation.

Hermione looked downcast.

"Severus, don't you have anything else to say to Miss Granger?"

"You would like me to accept her apology? All right, I accept it." He leaned back as though he assumed his empty words ended the conversation.

"No, that was not what I was thinking of. I think you can ease Miss Granger's conscience, Severus." When Severus just looked at him blankly, Albus continued, "There were others who could have stopped the fight before it escalated. I am thinking of one person in particular."

"Draco, of course, did nothing. I'll speak with him about that."

"It was not Mr Malfoy I was thinking of. I was thinking of an older Slytherin, one who should have known better."

Severus froze as the realisation hit him. Of course: he could have intervened sooner, but he had chosen to watch from the shadows, hoping for a bit of amusement. Amusement at Hermione's expense, in fact. He swallowed. He looked at Minerva. She already knew he was a bastard, but once she learned of the role he had played in his own downfall, she would surely reject him and cease helping him. Albus was waiting. All three of them were looking at him.

Taking a deep breath, Severus said, "Miss Granger, I heard the argument from my office. In fact, I came out and watched the four of you for a few minutes before deciding to do anything about it. When I did, it was just in time to catch the spell that Miss Parkinson cast. It is not your fault, Miss Granger." Severus looked as though he had just eaten something quite bitter.

"Oh." Hermione looked at him. "Oh. You saw the whole thing? You saw that I couldn't get them to stop fighting, and you just watched?" Hermione looked at him, an unreadable expression on her face. "I see . . ." She looked at Minerva then at Albus, then back at Severus. She shook her head, then turned to the Headmaster. "Thank you for letting me apologise, Professor Dumbledore. I suppose I feel . . . less guilty now."

After Hermione had left, the three sat in the sitting room, Severus with his face in his hands, Albus and Minerva watching him.

"How did you know?" Severus finally croaked.

"Hermione's Pensieve memory. She wasn't aware of it herself, but I saw you come out of your office and hide behind the suit of armour."

"Oh."

"Severus, I find it difficult to believe you would do that," Minerva said. "You are a teacher. You have certain responsibilities. The safety of the students is your *highest* responsibility. I know you take it seriously in your classroom, and I fail to understand how you could have behaved that way. It is terrible what happened to you even if it is your own fault but something worse might have happened to one of the students. Parkinson or Bulstrode could have been injured, Draco could have been hit by the curse instead, the three Slytherins might have turned on the one Gryffindor who was there interfering in an internal Slytherin matter. You mentioned before that you had watched them, but I never realised that you watched long enough to have been able to have intervened before things got out of hand. I am very disappointed in you, Severus. *Very* disappointed."

Tears gathered in Severus's eyes. He stood and cleared his throat. "Thank you for all you have done for me, Minerva. I will go to my rooms now. Albus, if you could seal me in, it might be wise. Several strong Imperturbables would also not be amiss." He walked over to the fireplace and took a pinch of Floo-Powder.

"Whatever do you think you're doing, Severus? If you think I'm going to allow you to go lock yourself away and die just because you are upset with yourself or embarrassed, or whatever it is that you are feeling, you are very, very wrong." Minerva glared at him.

Severus let the Floo-Powder drift from his fingers. "I am even more sorry than you could possibly know, Minerva. I do not know how you can bear to look at me." He could not look at her.

"Well, I *am* angry with you. But I think that now that you realise you are partially responsible for what has happened to you, you will see that you are reaping the consequences of your actions not that you deserve having been hit by this particular spell, but you could have averted it."

Severus nodded and plopped into an armchair. "There is nothing more I can say, is there?"

"Not at the moment, Severus."

Albus cleared his throat and addressed the dejected wizard. "Before dinner, I want to bring you to the suite of rooms I have set aside for you, so that you can find them on your own. We will leave in a half hour. In the meantime, I am going to my office to see if there is anything pressing that requires my attention. I will see both of you later." Albus nodded at Severus, kissed Minerva's cheek, and Flooed back to his office.

Minerva called Wilsby and asked her to bring her a bowl of egg drop soup and some crackers. As she ate, she read the parchments in the yellowing folio. Severus sat and watched her.

"Do you have to watch me eat, Severus? It's rather unnerving."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, moving to sit on the sofa with his back to her, the only way he could avoid gazing at his true love.

After she had finished her soup, Minerva came and sat beside him. "Albus will be returning shortly. Since you will be going directly from the suite to the Great Hall, I think you should act on the imperative now."

Severus nodded. He took both her hands in his and kissed them each in turn. "You are a great-hearted woman, Minerva, to have forgiven me."

"I don't know about that, but I do hope you have learned something from this . . . escapade. Wasn't I telling you not long before Miss Granger arrived that you tend to make self-destructive choices? You need to learn from this figure out what it is that you are doing when you are making these decisions that end so badly, and then stop reacting in such a self-destructive way."

"I will. I will think about it now. I hope that I am able to heed this lesson if we defeat the spell, however. I know I am not a nice person, Minerva." He kissed her hands again.

Minerva raised one of her hands to his face. "You *aren't* particularly nice, Severus, but you have been good to Albus, and you have many other redeeming qualities which you rarely show anyone, unfortunately."

"You think too highly of me, Minerva. But I do not want to dissuade you. I love you and do not want you to think badly of me." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, then embraced her. "I love you so, Minerva. Loving you might make me a better person." He kissed her cheek again, then kissed her neck, tenderly placing light kisses in the hollow of her throat. Severus eased Minerva down so she rested on the pillows at the arm of the sofa, continuing to kiss her throat. His lips gently sucked the soft skin above her collar bone before moving down to caress the creamy skin of her breast.

Minerva relaxed, remembering her desire to not feel degraded at the end and thinking of her own acceptance of Severus's proposal that he try to bring her pleasure. She reminded herself, too, that the more he was able to act on the imperative at that moment, the better he would withstand the next separation. When Severus's lips moved to the skin of her breasts left exposed by the neckline of her robes, therefore, she did not push him away. She closed her eyes and placed one hand on Severus's shoulder, ready to stop him when she deemed she had allowed him sufficient liberties.

Severus continued to kiss the exposed skin of Minerva's breasts, moving from one side to the other, then back again. He raised his hand and gently caressed her throat, tracing the line his lips had taken, all the while continuing to lightly kiss Minerva's soft skin.

Eyes closed, Minerva tried to concentrate not on the fact that it was Severus who was doing this in response to the spell, but solely on the sensation of his lips and his fingertips, blanking out all else. As his lips moved across her skin and his fingertips caressed her, Minerva felt flushes of warmth flow in waves through her, and a tingling and heaviness began to grow as her body responded to the physical attention that Severus was paying her.

Severus moved his hand to press against her breast through her robes. Minerva opened her eyes and urged him up and away from her.

"Will that hold you for a while, Severus?" she asked softly as she straightened up.

Severus blushed and nodded.

"Very well. I am going to go have another lie-down before dinner. You just wait here for Albus, all right?"

Another nod.

Minerva rose and left the room, closing the door behind her with a deliberate click. Casting a *Tempus* alarm to make sure that she didn't fall asleep and miss dinner and her performance, she lay down on her bed and blanked her mind, emptying it. She simply could not think about this situation any longer. She could not think about Severus, nor of her own wish to save him from the curse, nor of her desire not to find his touch repellant, nor about her confused feelings regarding the physical reactions he was causing in her when he touched her. She just couldn't think anymore at all.

Minerva was surprised to awaken to a gentle kiss on her lips. Mmm. Wonderfully familiar lips on hers. She opened her eyes, smiling, and reached up and caressed Albus's face. "I hadn't expected to see you again until I went to the Great Hall. This is a lovely surprise."

"I considered leaving the potion with a note in your sitting room, especially as I know you need some rest, but I selfishly decided I needed to see you before dinner. Then, of course, seeing you, I couldn't resist kissing you, my dear."

"Very naughty of you, Albus. But not quite as naughty as I wish you would be!" She raised an eyebrow, and when he grinned down at her, she couldn't help but smile back.

"Patience, my love. Later, I promise! We haven't much time at the moment." He sighed. "Your potion is on the table. Take the entire dose all at once it's not much, only about two teaspoons. It doesn't taste pleasant; perhaps mix it with a swallow of pumpkin juice. It would curdle milk, I'm afraid."

Minerva made a face. "Sounds lovely."

"I wish I could think of something else, but given the scrutiny that Severus is under, it needs to be very clear that you are ill. Otherwise his expedition to Mongolia will appear to be the ruse it is."

"Mongolia, hmm? Are you sure Siberia wouldn't be more appropriate?"

"Still angry with him, Minerva?"

"Yes, although," she sighed, "I see how he is suffering, and I really can't be as angry at him as I normally would be."

Albus bent and kissed her again. "I will see you soon!"

Twenty-five minutes later, Minerva walked into the Great Hall. She had cast a slight Glamour to make herself look pale and unwell. She approached the staff table and took hold of the edge, as if to steady herself before moving slowly to take her seat beside the Headmaster.

"Are you feeling quite well, Professor McGonagall?" Albus asked. "You seem a bit under the weather."

"I'm fine, Professor Dumbledore. Just a little tired perhaps."

She asked Filius how the roast beef was, poked at her own, then poured herself a small glass of pumpkin juice. She drank off half of it and poked at her meal a bit more.

"The Headmaster is right, Minerva. You don't look well. And you haven't touched your Yorkshire pudding," observed Filius.

"Perhaps I'm coming down with a cold. Nothing really appeals to me." She drank a bit more pumpkin juice. When she was sure no one was looking, she slipped the potion vial from her sleeve into her palm. She casually took a sip of the juice, and as she put it back down, she unstopped the small vial and let the potion run into her juice. Minerva took her napkin from her lap and dabbed her mouth, surreptitiously wrapping the vial in the napkin. When no one was observing her, she leaned toward Albus, slipping him the wrapped vial. She smiled at him and said, "Lovely weekend, wasn't it, Albus?"

He agreed as he took the vial and watched Minerva lift her glass to her mouth and drink the potion-laced juice. A very slight grimace crossed her features as she tasted the potion. Albus turned back to his meal, although he didn't seem to be eating with much appetite. On her other side, Severus had been watching her out of the corner of his eye whilst trying to focus on his conversation with Filius.

Minerva continued to play with her food when she noticed waves of nausea coming over her. She pushed her plate away. Now she was sweating. She turned to Albus and

stood shakily.

"Albus, I think I need to excuse myself. I am not feeling well " Minerva barely got the words out of her mouth before the room swam and her muscles began, first, to cramp, then to seize. Albus caught her before she fell to the floor. Minerva gurgled unintelligibly as she heard Albus call to Severus for help. She felt Albus's left hand stroking her brow as Severus's arms went around her, holding her gently as her limbs twitched and jerked. It was peculiar to be aware of everything that was happening and to have no control over it at all. Her muscle spasms subsided, and she heard Albus instruct Severus to pick her up and bring her to the Hospital Wing. In the meantime, Poppy had hurried over from her place at the other end of the table.

"Yes, carry her, Severus. She's still having seizures. We don't dare risk *Mobilicorpus*," she heard Poppy say.

She felt Severus lift her in his arms and stand. He whispered to her, "You'll be fine, Minerva. I am bringing you to the infirmary now."

As he carried her through the Great Hall, Minerva could tell that the entire room had gone completely still. Part way to the large doors, Minerva's muscular seizures began again. Severus's arms tightened around her. God, this was terrible. And Albus had taken this potion earlier in the day only to know what it was she would be experiencing? It was one thing to go through it herself, for good reason, and quite another for her to imagine Albus submitting to it only to find out what it was like, especially given the injury to his hand. Her muscles felt hard, tight, and on fire. Even the muscles around her rib cage were spasming, making breathing difficult. The back of her neck was sore as the muscles cramped up, and she could not keep her limbs from flailing.

Severus continued to hold her firmly, securely, despite the seizures. He would no doubt be quite bruised by the end of this. The spasms subsided, and Minerva gratefully allowed her head to loll against Severus. He smelled of nutmeg and chocolate, she noticed. She had been vaguely aware of his scent over the past two days, but hadn't paid it much attention. Now she took a moment to be glad that he didn't smell of some nasty potions ingredients or something. With her nausea as acute as it was, she thought she would have been sick all over him if he had. Albus and his "mild nausea"! She would have to remind him when this was over that she had a more sensitive stomach than he did.

As they reached the infirmary and Poppy directed Severus to one of the private rooms, the muscle spasms began again. Minerva suppressed a groan. She felt Severus lay her gently onto a bed, then maintain a hold around her, supporting her head and holding her arms close to her chest. She thought she heard the door close. She heard Albus's voice, then felt his hand on her forehead.

The spasms subsided again and she opened her eyes. Severus was still holding her, but it was Albus's face she saw. "It won't be much longer, Minerva. Another ten minutes, perhaps, then you'll gradually feel better."

"Kay," she rasped.

"There's nothing I can give you right now, Minerva," Poppy said, "but in fifteen minutes or so I can give you something that will help you recover a little faster. You'd just vomit any potion back up if I gave it to you now."

The thought of vomiting made Minerva groan and close her eyes. She swallowed a few times. Someone was gently wiping her face with a cool, damp flannel. She opened her eyes again to see that Severus was cleaning the sweat from her face. "Thanks, Severus," she said hoarsely. He nodded, no doubt afraid to say anything in front of Poppy, lest he begin to gush.

"Poppy, do you think I can go back to the Great Hall for a moment and announce that Minerva is all right? And would you know at this point what she is suffering from, or should we wait to announce the cause of her illness?" Albus asked.

"Wait to make any announcement of what caused her illness, Albus. Instruct everyone to remain in the Great Hall pending the diagnosis. I will go and make an announcement with you later."

Minerva's seizures began again, and she felt Albus's hand stroking her face. They subsided more quickly this time, and she opened her eyes. "Albus . . . I'm fine. Go to the Great Hall. Tell the students I'm fine. They'll be worried."

He nodded and kissed her forehead lightly before leaving.

When the muscle spasms finally ceased, Poppy suggested to Severus that he might like to return to his dinner or wait outside. She looked rather oddly at Minerva when she told the matron that she would prefer Severus to stay a while. Poppy just nodded, however, and poured out a small dose of a very thick, dark syrup.

"Here, this potion isn't as nasty as the one you just took, but I have to warn you that it is quite hot."

Minerva sat up shakily as Severus, with great solicitude, helped ease her up and placed pillows behind her back. He hadn't spoken a word since they had arrived in the Hospital Wing, thank goodness, but his continued presence at Minerva's side obviously mystified the mediwitch. Poppy held out the small cup containing the thick, brown potion. Minerva's hand shook as she reached for it, and Severus took it from Poppy's hand and brought it to Minerva's lips. "If it is the potion I believe it is, it contains a good deal of ginger and brown mustard seed, which will make it burn a bit as it goes down, but it won't last long, m Minerva," he said softly.

They had been right; the potion was very hot, but although it was as thick as molasses, it went down easily. In a few minutes, Minerva was feeling a great deal better.

"Feeling more like yourself?" Poppy asked. "Good. Now I have something that will taste much nicer and that will help the residual muscle cramps. I'll be right back."

After Poppy closed the door behind her, Severus suddenly went limp and collapsed onto Minerva, placing his head in her lap. "Oh, Minerva, that was dreadful. Just awful. I didn't think I could bear to see you in pain one second longer. The only thing that got me through it was remembering that I was helping you and bringing you comfort, and that you would soon be well. I am also very glad that it was one of my potions that helped you."

"A potion you brewed or a potion you created, Severus?" Minerva asked as she gently stroked the distressed wizard's hair.

"Both. It helps some with the after-effects of *Cruciatus*. It should be even more effective against the potion that Albus gave you. I should have asked him more about it before allowing him to give it to you. I may have been able to save you some pain, dearest one."

Minerva grimaced at the term of affection, but said only, "Remember, Severus, Albus took it himself." She added, somewhat disingenuously, "And it no doubt looked worse than it felt. I think you could have heard a pin drop in the Great Hall when you carried me out. It must have made quite an impression."

Severus sat up and looked at Minerva, wiping her forehead once more with the cool cloth. "They stood as I carried you out. Even the Slytherins, Minerva. And they were completely silent. Your students care about you. None of mine ever would. I'm just the bastard of the dungeons, the great, greasy bat. They'd probably cheer if it were I who had been struck down like that."

"You forget Hermione Granger, Severus. She skipped dinner for you Friday, remember? She was worried about you."

"She felt guilty. Just Gryffindor conscience. That's all it was."

"Perhaps. But then she found the other book for you, which, although it turned out to be of as little use as any of the other texts, was still very thoughtful of her. And she went out of her way to talk to Pansy. Without Miss Granger, we would still be wondering whether you had been ambushed."

"Hmmpf. Miss Granger is exceptional in many ways. But that she is an exception simply proves my point: the students hate me."

"In part because of the image you have cultivated. I sometimes think you don't know yourself where the image ends and the real Severus Snape begins."

"Perhaps it is all image and no substance, Minerva. Perhaps there is no 'real' Severus Snape. Or perhaps what you see is what you get: I truly am a nasty, irredeemable bastard."

"I don't believe either of those statements, Severus. But I am tired now. I can't talk about such things at the moment."

Severus nodded and watched as Minerva closed her eyes. He gently took one of her hands. "If there is anything true about me," he whispered, "it is you and my love for you."

Before Minerva could respond, the door opened and Poppy came in. She stopped and blinked as she noticed that Severus Snape was holding the Transfiguration mistress's hand. Severus swallowed and, with great deliberation, laid Minerva's hand on her lap and gave it a pat. "I'll just wait outside for the Headmaster now, Minerva."

"My, after seeing that, perhaps I should have made one of these for myself," Poppy said as she handed a tall glass to Minerva, waiting until Severus had left the small room and closed the door behind him.

"What is this?" Minerva asked, deliberately avoiding the topic of what Poppy saw when she came in.

"Vodka tonic. Heavy on the tonic. No gin, since I didn't think that the juniper would mix well with the potion I just gave you, for all this is a Muggle drink."

Minerva took a sip of the cold drink. "Hmm. Don't know what made you think of this, but a drink is actually quite welcome right now."

"The tonic has quinine in it. You should drink more of it minus the alcohol! later tonight. It will help rehydrate you and might help your muscles recover from the spasms. You should get Albus to drink some, as well. He refused my offer earlier; said he had to get back to you. So, did he need to get back to you because there is some trouble between you two? Or because of Severus?"

"What do you mean, 'because of Severus,' Poppy?" Minerva asked her friend sharply. "And no, not that it's your business, but Albus and I are fine."

"Well, perhaps my eyes deceived me, but I believe that when I walked in, the 'greasy git of the dungeons' was holding your hand, Min."

"Don't call him that, Poppy. And don't call me 'Min.' You know I hate it."

"You aren't going to explain any of it, are you?"

"No. You can talk to Albus about it, if you like. You can even tell him precisely what you saw. He is the only one who can answer any questions you have. Now, be a friend, Poppy, and just let me finish this lovely drink in peace."

"Hmmpf. All right, then. No more awkward questions, but there's obviously something going on here. I have a fresh robe for you that you can put on when you're done with your drink. You must be uncomfortable in that sweaty one." Poppy chuckled. "Severus should change, too, you sweat so much all over him. Didn't seem to bother him, though." She shook her head. "You really aren't going to tell me what's going on, are you?"

Minerva just handed Poppy her empty glass. "Thank you for the drink, Poppy. Most refreshing. And I'll make sure that both Albus and I drink more tonic water tonight. Now I think I'll put on that fresh robe."

When Albus returned to the infirmary twenty minutes later, Minerva had drifted into a light sleep. He peeked in on her before turning to Poppy and suggesting that she accompany him to the Great Hall to address the staff and students.

"Severus, I would like you to stay here and look after Minerva whilst we are gone. Make sure that no one disturbs her. And take care of any needs that might crop up, all right, my boy?"

Severus nodded, narrowing his eyes at Poppy when she opened her mouth to say something. After they left, he reentered Minerva's room and sat in a chair by the side of her bed. Minerva opened her eyes and yawned.

"Severus. You're back. Has Albus returned yet?"

"Only briefly." Severus paused, then added, "He looked in on you, but you were sleeping. He and Poppy have gone to announce your illness to the Great Hall. Do you know what it is you're supposed to have?"

"Febrile contagious magical distemper of the spasmodic type, I think Albus said."

Severus's brow furrowed. "That's a very dangerous and contagious disease. How are they going to explain why you are staying here and not going to St. Mungo's?"

"I suppose because of the contagious part. Poppy has the authority to make the decision on whether to keep me here or send me to St. Mungo's. This isn't like the stunner incident. As long as Poppy declares me stable and responding to treatment, there shouldn't be a problem."

"But if it's contagious "

"Severus, I know you are unwell, but do think a bit. The incubation period must be at least a few days. Who knows where or how I contracted it, but I'm sure that Albus and Poppy worked that all out. Albus did say that this illness met all of our needs, and Poppy will perform diagnostic spells on everyone who's been in contact with me during the last day, to maintain appearances. Fortunately, I can count fewer than a dozen people other than you, Albus, and Hermione with whom I've been in the same room during that time, and since Argus is a Squib, she might not even have to test him for it."

"I still think something could go wrong with this ruse. What if someone wants to visit you?"

"Highly contagious, remember?"

"But there are Anti-Contagion Field Charms that can be used "

"Then for my peace of mind I don't want visitors. I'm sure Poppy will handle everyone just fine, Severus!"

"I am sure you must be right, Minerva. If you say it will be fine, it will be. It's just a habit of mine, thinking of everything that could go wrong with a plan . . . of course, there are always a few things that can go wrong that no one can anticipate." He sighed.

"That is why you are so valuable to Albus, Severus. Not the only reason, of course. We are both very glad you are here, and I hope you remember that, even when I'm a bit cranky during this particular crisis."

"I will, my love. If it weren't for me, you would not be in this situation." Severus's eyes filled with tears. "I have caused you so much discomfort already, intruded on your life, deprived you of sleep, burdened you with my attentions, and now you have endured this dreadful potion for my sake. And everything is likely to be futile, since we have found no counter-spell or potion to release me from this curse. Your suffering is in vain." Tears rolled freely down his face.

"It's all right, Severus. I do not believe that it is futile. And I care about you; I couldn't do anything other than help you if you needed me, you see. It also makes me feel good to know I am able to help you." She reached out and took Severus's hand. "You will see, Severus. Everything will work out. You will be back to your usual sunny self before my fake illness runs its course. I promise you. I promise, Severus."

He laid his head in her lap and wept.

After a few minutes, Minerva said gently, "Severus, Albus and Poppy will be back soon. You need to gather yourself together."

Severus sat up and wiped his face on his sleeve. "I'm sorry, Minerva. I seem to break down in tears at the slightest provocation under this spell." He attempted to sneer. "Snivellus' returns." His voice cracked and his face crumpled.

"Hush, hush, Severus! You are a fine, brave man. You are dealing with the spell admirably. Come here." She put a hand on his shoulder and reached up to kiss his cheek. "Now hand me my wand Poppy put it over there and I will just give you a little Glamour. No need for Poppy to see you might have more of a heart than she thinks you do. Keep your nasty reputation intact!" she joked.

Minerva's timing was impeccable; she had just cast the Glamour when the door opened and Poppy and Albus entered.

"Well, my boy, thank you for looking after Minerva for me," Albus said. "We will meet you in a little while. You go on ahead; I'll bring Minerva in a bit."

"Very good, Headmaster. I was wondering . . . how did the students and staff react when you made your announcement?"

"Well, clearly they are all concerned. And Filius has been drafted to make a list of everyone with whom Minerva's been in contact over the last twenty-four hours so that Poppy can test them. All students who haven't been in contact with her were told they should return to their common rooms. The Gryffindors were particularly worried, but Hagrid said that he would look after them for you, Minerva. That will actually be a relief to me I have been wondering how I could take care of Gryffindor, teach Transfiguration, do my regular work, and . . . assist in this situation," he ended, looking at Poppy as he avoided mention of the actual reason for Minerva's fake illness.

Severus nodded. "I am glad it is under control, then. I will meet you later, Albus." He nodded to Minerva and Poppy, then left with a sweep of his black robes.

"So, Albus," Poppy began, "What is going on here? I think I need to know more than I do especially as I have been asked to falsify medical records and take care of a patient whom you deliberately poisoned."

Albus winced. He began to answer her, but Minerva spoke first. "Poppy Pomfrey! What a thing to say to the Headmaster! And he most assuredly did not poison me! I took the potion myself, willingly. And he has told you it is Order business. That should be enough for you. I know that you are naturally curious, but please, for the sake of our friendship, if nothing else, just leave this alone. We appreciate all of the work you are doing to help us and if it makes it easier for you, I will tell you that you are helping to save someone's life. We really can't say any more than that."

"All right, Minerva. I'm sorry, Albus. I know you wouldn't deliberately harm Minerva. It's just all so odd especially with Severus here."

"We appreciate your discretion, Poppy," Albus said. He looked at her somewhat sharply. *Including* about the fact that Severus may have appeared more solicitous than is his normal habit."

"Of course. Well, I suppose you want to smuggle her out now. I will just go check the corridor for you despite being told to return to their common room, I have a feeling that at least a few Gryffindors might try to visit the Hospital Wing."

Sure enough, it took another fifteen minutes for Poppy to rid the hallway outside the infirmary of stray Gryffindors. Hagrid finally came up and shooed them off toward Gryffindor Tower, promising Poppy that he would make sure they didn't come around and bother her or Professor McGonagall.

Albus carried Minerva, in her Tabby form, in a sling under his robes he had donned particularly voluminous ones that afternoon. He could feel her warm fur against his side and the rhythmic thrumming of her purr. He had to be careful not to smile, lest someone see him and think he had a very odd attitude for a wizard whose Deputy had just been struck down by a terrible illness.

They arrived safely at the suite of rooms Albus had set up for their use. Using a charm, Albus partially unbuttoned his robes to allow Minerva to jump down from the sling. She stretched, then with a slight pop, returned to her ordinary form. She turned just as he was about to rebutton them.

"Ah ah ah!" she said, approaching him. She reached inside his robes and put her arms around him, leaning into him and nuzzling his beard. "Mmm."

"Um, Minerva," Albus said, putting his right arm around her whilst simultaneously easing her away from him. "Severus," he whispered in her ear.

She turned to see Severus standing behind them in a bedroom doorway, looking grey and sweaty.

"I'm sorry. I just heard you come in."

"It's all right, Severus. I should have thought," Minerva said. "Were you going to check on Slytherin, see how they are doing after the incident in the Great Hall?"

"Yes, I suppose I should. You are right, as always, Minerva."

"Severus, you may want to stop by your room or your office and bring back anything you think you will need here," Albus said.

"Good, right. I will do that." He started toward the door, seeming to stumble a bit on the edge of the carpet.

"Wait, Severus. I know we spent some time together in the infirmary, but it's been a while. I think before you leave, we should make sure that you can get to the dungeons and back without any problems."

"Oh, yes. Of course," he responded, looking somewhat dazed.

Albus gave Minerva a kiss on the cheek. "I'll wait in the other bedroom for you, all right, my dear?"

As soon as Albus had left, though not closing the door behind him, Minerva led Severus to a large sofa in the centre of the room. "Come sit with me a moment, Severus."

He sat with her on the sofa and held her in his arms, running one hand up and down her back, kissing her forehead, then her eyelids, then he merely clutched her to himself, gently rubbing her back. Minerva let herself relax against him. He did feel solid, more solid than he appeared, and it had been good of him to hold her so securely when she was having the muscle spasms, even if it had been the spell that had motivated him.

Finally, he whispered, "Are you really feeling better, Minerva? You seemed so ill."

"I am, Severus. I am a bit sore, like I've run a marathon or something, but other than that, I am fine," she reassured him.

"I love you, Minerva," he said, pulling away from her and looking down into her eyes. "I love you, and I am not saying that just because of the spell, although the spell frees me to say it. You have done more for me than I deserve, more than anyone else would, and I love you." He kissed her brow before pulling her close to him again.

Minerva relaxed into his embrace. This was different, somehow not as frantic, nor as oblivious, as his other gestures and declarations. Finally, Minerva sat up. "You had best see to your House, Severus." She brushed his hair back from his face before kissing his cheek. "Go take care of your students." She rose, and he stood as well.

"You are a marvel, Minerva McGonagall." He bowed and raised her hand to his lips.

Minerva let out a sigh of relief when the door closed behind him. She hurried into the bedroom to join Albus. Without even looking around her, she went over to the bed

where he was sitting waiting for her and threw herself into his arms. After a moment of just being held, laying her head on his shoulder, Minerva sighed and said, "Severus can actually be a little sweet occasionally, but I still couldn't wait for him to finally leave so I could have you to myself!"

"Mmm." He kissed her temple. "I heard most of what he said. It was rather sweet. And he's right, you are a marvel!"

Minerva looked up in alarm. "I'm sorry! Did that bother you?"

"No, no, my dearest. You haven't any control over what he says, after all, and I would hope that you would show him some affection. And it is good to hear that he appreciates you as much as he does. I believe that he was sincere."

"Perhaps . . . but I far prefer it when *you* appreciate me, Albus!"

"I know, and I intend to *appreciate* you very much before Severus returns, my dear." He kissed her lips lightly before drawing back and laying her crosswise on the bed, her feet and ankles just hanging off the side. "We may not have much time, but I intend to make the most of it. Now, after your recent ordeal, I want you to just lie back and enjoy yourself. Just relax."

"But Albus, you took the potion, too!"

"Hours ago, my dear. And this will be my tonic!" He wandlessly Levitated some pillows over and lifted her to place them behind her back. He smiled. "Now remember, you just lie there and enjoy my little . . . *'treatment.*'"

He moved to her feet and removed her shoes before placing his hand beneath Minerva's skirts and pushing them up. Using just his left hand and no magic, he gently, slowly rolled down first one stocking then the other, leaving them to lie on the floor. He began to massage her feet, ending by kissing each one softly. He then proceeded to her calves, gently massaging each one in turn and lightly following his touch with kisses trailing up till he reached her knee. Albus eased her legs further apart and pushed her skirts up further still. His touch became light as he softly stroked the tender, sensitive skin of her inner thighs, first one, then the other, then caressing her right leg whilst kissing, nipping, licking, and sucking her left. He moved his lips to her right leg, trailing kisses up and down, his beard tickling her skin; Minerva moaned and raised her hips slightly, and Albus reached up under her robe and, left hand on her pelvis, pressed her back down to the bed, leaving his hand there.

"Mmm, Albus, you will drive me mad," Minerva said hoarsely.

"You must lie still and take your treatment, my dear." His voice vibrated teasingly against her inner thigh; he had neared her sex, his lips caressing the hollow juncture between her inner leg and her core.

Minerva moaned as Albus nosed her through her knickers.

"Mmm. You smell so lovely, my dear, so sweet. But we must check to see if all is in order down here, mustn't we?" He hooked a finger beneath the crotch of her panties. "Mmhm. Nice and moist. Quite wet, in fact. But I think a closer inspection," he said, pausing to kiss the damp silk, "a closer inspection is called for." He whispered a spell and the knickers disappeared.

"Very good." His voice was low. He spread her lips with his fingers, lingering and caressing them teasingly as he did so. "Visual inspection shows nice, healthy, glistening, wet flesh," he continued, pretending to be calmly clinical about his "inspection" as Minerva fought her desire to push into his fingers. "And tactile inspection . . . yes, nicely plumped, mmhm, and the clitoris," he said, flicking a finger over her excited nub, "seems well engorged. We must test it for sensitivity, however." He gently blew a stream of air over her clit, and she raised her hips once more; he urged her back down to the bed. "And manual manipulation of this sweet organ," he whispered softly as he began to rub the object of his close inspection, "does have the desired results. But we need to assure ourselves of the internal health of this precious jewel," he said, his whispered breath tickling her nub as his mouth came tantalisingly close to her centre. Albus slid a finger from its previous teasing spot down to the opening of her vagina. He circled, entered a little way, then drew out his finger.

"Yes, nice and wet." He inserted his finger again just to his first knuckle, pulled it out, then thrust it all of the way in and said, "Now to make sure it still maintains its . . . flexibility." Minerva moaned and tilted her hips as Albus withdrew only to plunge three fingers into her. He smiled and placed his right arm over her, holding her down gently. With his thumb repeatedly rubbing her clit as he pumped his fingers in and out of her warm wetness, he looked up to see Minerva watching him with half-open eyes, flushed, lips parted, her breath coming in gasps and moans. Just as he believed she was about to come, he stopped, gently withdrawing his fingers and caressing her clit before bringing his hand up. She groaned.

"Yes, quite wet. But is it of its usual quality and consistency?" He raised his hand and sniffed before bringing it to his mouth and, one at a time, slowly licking each of his fingers and his thumb as Minerva watched, licking her own lips.

"Mmm. Very nice. But I must drink from the source, I believe."

First kissing and licking her inner thighs again, Albus moved gradually toward Minerva's warm, wet centre, holding her to the bed with his right arm. His tongue circled her clit twice before he licked the soft, slick flesh around her vagina. With a vibrating moan of contentment, Albus slipped his tongue into her wetness, licking and thrusting, drawing his tongue up over her clit before once more plunging it into her vagina. Over and over again, he licked her clit and thrust into her warm wetness, licking and thrusting, licking and thrusting, pausing only once to gently suckle her engorged nub. His beard brushed her sensitive flesh as his lips and tongue moved from her clit to her vagina and back again. Finally, as she squirmed under him, he replaced his tongue with his fingers once more and devoted his mouth to sucking and licking her swollen clit, flicking his tongue over it, then gently suckling, as he drove his fingers deep into her again and again. Flicking, licking, and suckling, manually thrusting, listening to her gasps and moans of pleasure, Albus moaned with pleasure himself as he continued to tease and stimulate Minerva, suckling her nub as his lips and tongue joined his fingers in bringing her closer and closer to explosive orgasm.

"Oh, gods, Albus! Ah ah! Albus! Albus, my love, my Albus, Albus, Albus!" Minerva cried as she came, arching to meet his thrusting hand and laving tongue, quivering beneath his touch before she finally collapsed.

Albus looked up at her, grinning and licking his lips. "I'd say you are *quite* healthy, my dear!"

Minerva sighed, flushed and exhausted, a slight smile on her lips. "And you really are *quite* naughty, you know that, don't you?"

"Just as you like it *and* as you requested earlier!" He smiled as she reached down to pull him up beside her.

"Mmm. Now kiss me, you devil!" she said with a playful growl. And kiss her he did, using his tongue on her mouth and lips and tongue as he had used them elsewhere only a few moments before.

Minerva sighed happily and stretched. Albus began to play with her hair, removing a single hairpin and twirling her hair through his fingers before removing another one and repeating the process, a content smile on his face.

"That was nice, Albus." At his raised eyebrows, she added, *Better* than 'nice,' in fact, but I feel I need *a little* something more . . . or a big something more." She reached over and grasped Albus's erection through his robes. "Yes, a *big* something more, like this." She kissed him and unbuttoned his robe. His penis sprang through the opening.

"Have I told you how much I appreciate your traditional dress, Headmaster?" she asked, suppressing a smile as she handled him, fondling the chamois-soft skin of his cock.

"I believe you may have mentioned it once or twice, Professor McGonagall. Mmm," he moaned softly as her attentions grew more fervid.

"I want more, Albus," she whispered in his ear. "But, as you say, *I am* recovering from my ordeal. I think we need to move a bit." Minerva kissed him, drawing his tongue into her mouth briefly before pulling back. She moved and lay lengthwise on the bed and patted the pillow beside her. When Albus moved to lie beside her, she said, "No, sit here, right here."

"I love to see him peeking out of your robes and poking through your beard like that, you know; it seems so naughtily sexy of you," Minerva said as she began to fondle him teasingly, slowly, and gently. She swept his beard aside. Her entire focus was on his large cock. Albus could see her pupils dilate before she moved closer to him, nuzzling his erection, stroking it against her cheeks before gently kissing its head. The tip of her tongue came out to meet the tip of his penis, flicking across the head and the small, sensitive slit. She whirled her tongue around the head before licking it up and down its length. She again rubbed his penis against the soft skin of her cheeks before slowly, gradually putting her mouth around him, and going down, down, down, tongue sliding down his cock as her lips reached its base. Albus moaned as Minerva swallowed and he could feel her throat and tongue close around him. Languorously, Minerva raised her head, pressing her lips and tongue against him all of the way up, at the end, closing her teeth around his head, shielding him from their sharp edges with her lips, and Albus groaned in response. She flicked her tongue across and over and back and over until, again, she lowered herself on him, sucking, licking, and swallowing. Then she suddenly increased her tempo as Albus clenched her shoulder with his left hand. She reached inside his robes and began to lightly stroke his balls, feathering touches up to the base of his cock and down again. As she felt his balls begin to tighten, she relaxed and slowly lifted her head from his lap. Albus moaned at her absence.

She lay back against her pillow and motioned to him to lie beside her. Albus moved down, put his head next to hers on the pillow and began to slowly, softly, gently kiss her. Minerva pressed herself against him as their kisses gradually grew more heated. He reached between them and moved her skirt up and out of the way. Rubbing her most sensitive spots, he pulled back from kissing her and smiled. "Still very, very wet, my love."

"Mmm, should do something about that," Minerva moaned as he continued to fondle her. "Don't let it go to waste."

"Never. That would not do at all." He pulled her closer, and when she extended her right leg around his hips, he could feel her moist warmth against his cock. He shifted, and the head of his cock was at her entrance. Albus thrust upward and into her just as she moved to meet him.

Lying there, side by side, they paused just to look at one another before he lowered his head to kiss her as he began to thrust. Their movements were easy, passionate but unhurried. Minerva finally broke from their kiss to gasp and moan as he stroked within her. She buried her face in his hair and found his neck. As he thrust up into her and she moved with him, she kissed, then gently nipped, his neck, wishing for the first time that evening that he had disrobed so she could close her mouth around his shoulder as she cried out her passion. And then it came, wave after wave, seeming as though it would never stop, so intense she could not see and neither knew nor cared whether her eyes were open or closed.

Minerva heard, or felt, Albus's breath become harsh and ragged as he pushed deep into her once, twice, three times more, crying softly, "Minerva, oh, my Minerva, Minerva, sweet love!" He lay still, holding her tightly, his breathing slowing. Then he turned his head and whispered in her ear, "Minerva, my sweetest one, you are my darling, my dearest, my only beloved; you complete me. You are the greatest blessing of my life." He let out a great sigh as he held her close to him.

Seven: A Mirror and a Massage

Chapter 7 of 16

Severus sees something too clearly; he has a gift for Minerva after her ordeal that evening.

Albus and Severus have another talk.

A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Seven: A Mirror and a Massage

Severus left the suite; as he approached the narrow staircase leading to the seventh floor corridor the only apparent exit from this peculiar corner of the castle he remembered that he could have and, perhaps, should have, taken the Floo from his bedroom. Albus had explained to him that the sitting room Floo was connected only to the Headmaster's office, but the Floo in his temporary bedroom was connected to both his Defence Against Dark Arts office and his own sitting room in the dungeons. Although Albus didn't say whether the fireplace in the other bedroom was connected to the castle's internal Floo-Network, Severus presumed it was connected either to the Headmaster's office or to his personal suite and perhaps also to Minerva's sitting room. Now, though, he would have to make his way through the castle, no doubt meeting dunces wandering around out of their common rooms.

As he walked to the great staircase that would bring him down to the main part of the castle, a large figure approached him. At least it wasn't a student, Severus thought with a sigh.

"Lo, there, Perfesser Snape. Do yeh know how Perfesser McGonagall is doin'? I was down t' infirmary earlier, but I 'ad t' shoo a few Gryffindors back t' Tower. I been keepin' an eye on 'em since. Can't 'ave 'em disturbin' the Deputy Headmistress, now. But I di'n' get word on how she was doin'."

"Madam Pomfrey has stabilised her, Hagrid. It is good of you to ask after her and look to her students for her. I am sure she will be grateful." Severus almost bit his tongue. Could he say anything *more* out of character? Hagrid, his eyes filling with tears, didn't seem to notice, though.

"She's a great lady, a great witch, Perfesser. She's done me more'n one favour in me life. 'Tis the least I can do fer 'er. An' you, Perfesser! Yeh were righ' wonderful with 'er, carryin' 'er like yeh did. I wish I'da been closer; I'da helped yeh."

Severus stiffened. "There was no need for that, Hagrid. I had her."

"I know yeh did. An' the way she was thrashin' 'abou', couldn'ta been easy."

Remembering Minerva's convulsions, Severus gritted his teeth. "She's in good hands, now, Hagrid. If you will excuse me, I must check on my own House." It was highly

unlikely that they would be hanging about outside the infirmary as the Gryffindors had done, but they could be up to something else, assuming that everyone's attention was so diverted they could get away with something.

After a few more sentimental words from Hagrid, accompanied by a bone-jarring thump on the back, Severus walked quickly down the stairs, which co-operated with him, for once. He stopped to admonish two Ravenclaws to return to their common room, taking two points apiece simply because he could – it wasn't as though the students were under quarantine, after all, and it wasn't yet curfew, but he had to maintain *some* normality – and he quickly reached the dungeons and Slytherin House. The students were suspiciously quiet. He glared sternly and reminded them that he would be keeping an eye on them. A first-year came up and shyly asked him how Professor McGonagall was, and Severus gave her the same answer he had given Hagrid. She just stood there a moment, thinking, then she asked him if he was going to get sick now, too, because he had been carrying her. With a raised eyebrow, Severus told the girl that Madam Pomfrey had tested him and given him a clean bill of health, and he was surprised at the clear look of relief that crossed the girl's face as she said, "That's good. Blaise said you can *die* from what she got – and it looked awful!"

Nonplussed by the girl's remark, Severus cast a forbidding look at the other students before leaving for his own rooms. There was nothing he wanted from his office, he realised, as he couldn't concentrate long enough to grade papers. He could just leave them for Lupin. The thought of leaving work for Lupin did not cheer him as he supposed it should.

Severus looked around his sitting room. There wasn't anything there that he wanted, either. All he really wanted was to be with Minerva, return to her, reassure himself that she was well. He swallowed hard as he remembered *why* it was that all he wanted was to spend time with her. Had he ever thought of her like that before he had been struck by the *Adfectus*? It was difficult to remember, precisely. It was as though the pre-spell Severus had been a different person, although that was an absurd thought. He knew the *Adfectus* only freed his responses, pulling them to the surface; it didn't make him a different person. It simply overwhelmed everything else in his life and his personality.

Take Lupin, for example. He should be furious with the Headmaster for even suggesting that the werewolf take his classes in his absence; instead, he practically welcomed the beast with open arms. But . . . perhaps that was the correct response, and his typical response, the one conditioned by years of resentment, hatred, and fear – Severus shook his head in puzzlement as he realised that fear was a good part of his difficulty with the former Marauder – that his usual response was the one that was . . . what? Maladaptive? Furrowing his brow, he decided that he couldn't really say. He would ask Minerva. *She* would know, and he sighed with some relief at that thought.

Severus entered his bedroom and pulled a small, tattered canvas bag from the bottom of his wardrobe. He proceeded to stuff it with underwear and socks. Nightshirt or pyjamas? He didn't like pyjamas particularly, but they were more covering, and he didn't want to discomfit Minerva anymore than he had to. He shoved his one pair of pyjamas into the bag. His favourite terry cloth robe was too bulky to fit, and he didn't think he could manage any shrinking charms – he'd probably end up shredding his clothes or something, like a pathetic first-year – so he packed a robe that Albus had given him on his birthday a few years before, but which he had rarely worn. It was a light-weight, Slytherin-green silk with silver trim. Severus felt of the soft material as he placed in the bag. It was too good for him, he thought. That was why he seldom wore it. He had never articulated it before, but it was too good for him, both as an article of clothing and as a gift from Albus. Albus was the only person who ever marked his birthday; he persisted year after year. Severus didn't even know when the Headmaster's birthday was. He would find out from Minerva and get him something for his next birthday. Something nice. She could help him pick it out.

He hummed as he stuffed a few more essentials into the small bag. Slippers. One black under-robe and one black over-robe. A shirt. A pair of trousers. Belt and braces. Minerva was unlikely to dangle him upside-down by his ankles or use a spell to pull down his trousers in front of everyone in the middle of dinner in the Great Hall, but one could never be too careful. The house-elf could bring him another clean change of clothes if he needed it. Whispy, or Woopsy, or whatever her name was. The bathroom off his temporary bedroom, he had noticed, was well-stocked with shampoo, toothpaste, razor, and shaving soap and shaving brush, all of much better quality than his own. He added only a comb and his toothbrush.

It was good that he could Floo back to the suite. The over-stuffed bag wouldn't zip closed; he couldn't be seen walking the halls with it. All their secret plans would be for naught. Severus felt tired and slightly muzzy-headed, but the imperative wasn't yet strong. There was no reason to stay here, though. He wished he could bring Minerva a present. She seemed to like the flowers. Perhaps tomorrow he could go pick her some more . . . or perhaps candy. But he could never make it to Honeydukes and back. He would end up going mad in pursuit of a box of chocolates. Even in his current condition, that struck him as amusing, and one corner of his mouth quirked up briefly. Might as well return to the suite. Return to Minerva. A true smile crossed his face at that thought, and he strode over to the fireplace. What did Albus say was the password to the suite? *Credo et expecto*. "I believe and anticipate"? Occasionally, the Headmaster was a dotty old wizard . . .

Severus stepped through the fireplace into his temporary living quarters and tossed his bag on the bed. Now to see Minerva. There was no one in the sitting room, but he could hear Albus's voice coming from the other bedroom. They must both be there; he crossed the room, prepared to knock on the partially-opened door when he heard a gasp and a moan that sounded as though it came from Minerva. He heard a squelching sound and another moan. He was sure that Albus wasn't hurting her. He wouldn't would he? One hesitant step toward the open door – Severus peered through. In the mirror, he saw his beloved Minerva lying across the bed, legs spread, and Albus . . . Severus thought he would be ill as he watched Albus hold Minerva down as he thrust his fingers in and out of her. Then he did the unthinkable. He withdrew his fingers from her and he brought them to his mouth – and it looked as though he *liked* it! Albus said something very peculiar about consistency and quality. Did he put Minerva through some sort of bizarre, perverse testing? And now, oh, gods, Severus couldn't watch but he couldn't tear his eyes from the mirror as he saw Albus begin to lick and suck at Minerva's most private parts. Severus closed his eyes. He had heard that witches actually liked having that done to them, but he had always thought that only a depraved or brow-beaten wizard would willingly perform such an act. It sounded completely revolting to him. But then . . . he had never thought of it in any context but that of the Knockturn Alley whores he paid to give him pleasure – or Bella, back when he was young, before she'd married the pureblood LeStrange. *She'd* had a few perverse desires, Severus thought, but he'd never done *that* to her.

Severus opened his eyes again. He backed away. Now he felt ill. Albus had every right to be in there with Minerva. He had no right to do anything about it, yet he wanted to rush in and tear him from her body, to tell him that Minerva is a goddess and should be treated as such. He stumbled over to the sofa and collapsed on it. And Albus was so . . . so . . . so *old*. Severus knew that he and Minerva must engage in such activities – he had overheard a bit of it that very morning, which is why he had fled Minerva's rooms. He hadn't been able bear the thought of anyone but him touching her, which was at war with his desire for her to be happy, and if "taking a shower" with Albus made her happy . . . The imperative had torn him apart that morning when he'd knocked on the bedroom door and stepped in to talk to Albus, thinking that if Minerva were taking a shower, Albus must be out of the bathroom. He had only heard vague thumping and moans, but he knew what they meant, and had high-tailed it from the castle, practically running down to the gardens before the imperative allowed him to slow down. He had been tormented by the contradictory desires to have Minerva be happy and yet to be the only one to hold her, to touch her, and to bring her pleasure. The torment was that much worse now as he lay on the sofa and listened as Minerva cried out Albus's name.

It was quiet for a moment, then he heard their voices again, too softly for him to make out what was being said. Perhaps they were through. He should go into his room so they wouldn't find him here when they emerged from their bedroom. Severus sat up, but then he heard more moans. Gods, couldn't they *stop*? Albus was moaning . . . or saying something. There was a wet sound and more moans. It was quieter. Maybe they were through. But no, now they were *both* at it. Severus was now suffering from a new difficulty. He no longer felt sick; he felt aroused. He could bear it no longer and fled the room as quickly and quietly as he could, taking care to close his bedroom door behind him – softly, though he doubted they would notice if a marauding hippogriff ran through.

Severus pressed his palm against his erection. His mind fuzzier than ever, he stripped off his robes, then his shoes, shirt and trousers, leaving them littered across the room as he headed toward the bathroom. A cold shower. Yes, a cold shower. That was what would help. He shed his socks and underwear on the tile floor and turned on the shower's cold water. Severus stepped under the harsh stream and yelped when the icy water struck his unprepared body. Within a short time, his problem had subsided, and he adjusted the water so that it was merely tepid. Shivering, he took the opportunity to wash himself, although he paid less attention to his genitals than usual, worried that he might stimulate himself. He could not have Minerva noticing anything like that. He would have to see her soon; the imperative was growing stronger. He did not want her to be uncomfortable with him – more uncomfortable than she already was. He had been quite aroused when he was with her earlier, when he had kissed her breasts, but she surely hadn't noticed . . . had she? He turned the cold water back up and finished his shower.

After drying himself off with a fluffy white towel, Severus was shaking, and not from the cold. He desperately needed to see Minerva. He began pulling his clothes from his bag, scattering them on the bed as he found his pyjamas and robe. He put his dressing gown on inside out, but realised it when he couldn't find the belt tie and managed to

get it back on right way around. He shucked on his slippers. Now what? Should he go into the sitting room? But what if they were still in the bedroom? What if they had forgotten all about him and were still . . . doing *that*?

He would just have to wait here for them to come find him. But he would open his door first so they might think of him when they finally entered the sitting room.

In the bedroom, Minerva snuggled against Albus. "I suppose we should get up," she said.

"Mmm. Severus will be back soon. I should check on the state of the Houses and make an appearance in the Hospital Wing. And you, my dear, should get ready for bed. You have had an extremely long day with a very difficult ordeal this evening."

"Poppy said you should drink more tonight. She recommended tonic water for *usboth*, Albus. I am still amazed that you took the potion. You could have hurt yourself especially your *hand*!"

"I am fine. And Poppy immobilized my entire right arm before letting me take the potion. Of course, the muscles still contracted, but I didn't hit my hand against anything, so I am fine."

"Hmmpf. You are a foolish wizard sometimes, Albus, but I love you anyway!" She grinned and tugged his beard lightly before kissing him and getting up. "I think I will clean up and get ready for bed. You could go wait for Severus and let me know when he gets back."

"All right, my dear. I will just wash up a bit, first. I think we still have a little time."

A few minutes later, Albus walked out to the sitting room. He looked at the closed bedroom door. Had it been closed earlier? He stepped back into the bedroom and called out to Minerva, who stuck her head out of the bathroom.

"Minerva, do you remember whether the guest room door was open or closed when you came in?"

"Umm, open, I think. Yes. Open. Severus was standing in the doorway, remember? Then he left."

"It's closed now."

"Oh. Oh! He must be back. If he closed the door . . . oh, Albus, I didn't shut the bedroom door. He was gone. I didn't think he would be back." A pained look crossed her face as she thought of what Severus may have overheard.

"I suppose that is why Severus closed his door. He was trying to be discreet. Do not worry. He probably heard something after he Flooed back, and then closed his door right away."

"This is all so uncomfortable, Albus. I am not used to sharing our rooms with anyone else who can just come and go." She sighed. "Well, perhaps you should check on him. I will finish getting ready for bed are you staying, I hope?"

"Yes, my dear, for tonight, at least. I'll go find Severus."

He walked into the sitting room just as Severus opened the bedroom door. His hair was quite wet and the collar of his dressing gown was turned in.

"Severus, my boy! You're back! And ready for bed."

"Yes," came the croaked reply.

"Would you like some help drying your hair?"

Severus just looked at him quizzically for a moment before comprehension crossed his face. "No, that's all right, Headmaster. I'm just going to lie down for a bit."

"You aren't looking well, Severus." Indeed, he didn't. He was grey and his hands were trembling. "Let me fetch Minerva."

"No, no, that's not necessary. I will wait for her. Just need to lie down . . ." He stumbled back into the bedroom as Albus followed him. Severus lay down on his bed, heedless of the clothes scattered on it.

"I am fetching Minerva. You just sit tight, Severus."

His eyes were closed and his breathing shallow, but he nodded in response. A minute later, Minerva was there, sitting beside him, holding his hand.

"I'll help you with your . . . unpacking, Severus," she said, looking around her at the clothing strewn across his bed.

"You don't need to, Minerva," Severus responded, holding her hand to his mouth and kissing it. "Oh, Minerva, you look so beautiful." He reached up and ran his fingers through her loose hair.

"I was getting ready for bed when Albus came and told me you were back. I see you have done that, as well, Severus." She straightened the collar of his dressing gown. "You should dry your hair, though. Here, let me." She took her wand from her bathrobe pocket. "Come, sit up. There we go." She pointed her wand at his head, and he felt a strong jet of warm air flow over his hair. Within seconds, it was dry.

"Thank you, Minerva, my love."

"You're welcome, Severus. How are you feeling? You are looking a little poorly."

"I need you so much, Minerva," he said softly, lowering his eyes. "I can't help myself."

"I know, dear, I know." She patted his shoulder. "We have some time now. Albus has gone to make an appearance in the infirmary, supposedly to check on the state of my health, then he will look in on each of the Houses."

Severus just nodded and held her hand.

"Severus, you really don't look well. Don't you want to . . . do something?"

He nodded. "But it's no use. No use. Just leave me." He choked.

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus. Come, let's lie down for a while, hmm?" Minerva looked around at the scattered underwear and other clothes. She shook her head and waved her wand. Severus's clothes flew to the dresser and neatly folded themselves on top of it. "You can put it all away later. Oh, you're sitting on something." She tugged at the black robe and pulled it out from under him. She tsked at the wrinkled garment and sent it to hang itself in the wardrobe.

"I don't normally use spells for such things. It makes one lazy, I think, but it's handy to know a few," she said with a gentle smile. "Now, let's settle down for a bit."

Minerva urged Severus to lie back on the bed. She lifted his legs and swung them around so that he was lying lengthwise, then she pulled a pillow over, lifted his head, and placed the pillow under it. "You were very good to me in the infirmary, Severus. It was comforting."

His eyes filled with tears. "No, I wasn't. I was a burden. All I did was cry all over you. And if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have been there. I was the cause of your pain, Minerva. Oh, gods, let me *die*, please!" He turned his face into the pillow to hide his tears.

"Sh, sh." She stroked his hair. "You were happy to help me, and I am happy to help you. That's what friendship is about, Severus. Now scoot over and make me some room there."

Despite himself, Severus rolled over and made room for Minerva to lie beside him. She settled down beside him. "How is this, Severus? Can you act on the imperative now?"

"I don't know . . . I do not want to hurt you, Minerva."

"You won't. I will stop you as I always have. And if you ever begin to hurt me, I will tell you. We need to get you through tonight and then get up early tomorrow and work out a plan for the day."

He reached out and carded his fingers through her hair. "You have such beautiful hair. You always wear it up."

"Usually, yes."

Severus continued to comb his fingers through her hair. "Dark and beautiful. Just as in the poem I read you. I can remember some of it, Minerva*Of thy dark hair that extends / Into many graceful bends: / As the leaves of Hellebore / Turn to whence they sprung before.*' I remember because of 'Hellebore.' Can you save me from madness, as the wizard Melampus saved the daughters of Proetus?"

"He used Hellebore, didn't he? . . . I had forgotten that story." She caressed his face briefly. "I will save you, Severus, though I am not as powerful as Melampus."

"Albus is." He rested his hand on her shoulder, gently rubbing the side of her neck with his thumb.

"Yes, he is . . . more so, I think."

"I am not. Especially not now. I am weaker, Minerva. I do not know how I will teach tomorrow." His voice was low and dispirited.

"We will work out any problems in the morning. I have a few ideas that may help." She paused as Severus began to stroke her arm. "Albus has told me that you are one of the most powerfully magic wizards he has encountered, Severus. And you are extremely intelligent. If it weren't for that lunatic, you could have had quite a brilliant career in Potions, instead of having to either hide your creations or pervert your talents to his use."

Severus winced. "Of course. You know about that work. I don't do my best work for him, Minerva, honestly I don't."

"I know. But I believe you *do* do your best work for Albus. You saved his life this summer."

That statement seemed to disturb the wizard more.

"I can see you don't want to talk about this. It's all right, Severus." She patted his side.

Severus took her hand and kissed it, then looked into her eyes. "I don't remember anymore whether I knew how remarkable you are, Minerva. But I must have, or I would not love you." He leaned forward to kiss her, and she turned her cheek to him. He took her in his arms and embraced her. "You have been so concerned about my well-being, my love, and you have not told me how you are feeling," he whispered.

"I am a little sore, to be honest, but not badly so. I am sure I will feel better in the morning."

When Severus suddenly pushed himself away from her, Minerva was concerned that she had said something that had bothered him, but he was smiling and his eyes glowed. "I can help with that, Minerva. I will be right back! Wait for me!"

Minerva scarcely had time to blink before he was gone, Flooing to his rooms. She sat up and stretched. She had actually felt somewhat better when she had been in her Animagus form, so after a moment's consideration, she transformed. She leapt from the bed and padded into the sitting room where she jumped up onto the couch and stretched out. It was a creamy colour not the one that had been here when she was a student and would surely pick up her dark fur.

She hadn't paid much attentions to the furnishings in Albus's bedroom she had been too distracted by his attentions. She had never been in there before that night and wondered whether they were as they had been all those years ago. The guest room was as she remembered it, although the large bookcases that had covered the windows were gone, as were the piles of parchments and books that had been stacked against the walls. That all would have been moved to the Headmaster's suite over forty years ago. Other than that, it seemed unchanged to her.

It had been odd to be in the guest room with Severus. Minerva had felt somehow out-of-time in there. She hadn't been in that room for more than fifty years. Out-of-time and out-of-place in an unplotable and impossible room in the centre of Gryffindor Tower. Most peculiar . . .

She was still musing on the peculiarities of her situation when the largest peculiarity of all stepped into the room.

"There you are, Minerva! I was worried when you weren't there."

Minerva transformed to her ordinary form with a whispered pop. "I didn't consider that coming out here was going somewhere else, Severus. What have you got there?" she asked, motioning to the flask and jar in his hands.

"Ah! Gifts for you, Minerva! It's not flowers or anything romantic, I'm afraid," he said, looking worried that she would be displeased with his offerings.

"What are they?"

"This is the same potion you had this morning. You can take a smaller dose tonight before you sleep you could share it with Albus, if you like; there's a lot there. And this," he said, holding up the jar proudly, "this is your main gift. It is a potion much like the one you took, but it is for external use. I thought I could rub some into your muscles, help you to recover more quickly." He looked very pleased with himself.

Minerva didn't know what to say. The idea in-and-of itself was a good one and it was an offer that she might even ordinarily accept from Severus if he weren't . . . *love* with her, particularly under the influence of this spell. A massage of only particular areas, of course could be quite nice, even coming from a friend. A full massage, though, she reserved for Albus or, for medicinal purposes, Poppy or another mediwitch.

"That is very thoughtful, Severus," she said, before Severus could notice her hesitation. "Umm. I think perhaps my neck is the sorest. And my calves. Those muscles got quite a work-out!" she said brightly, hoping he wouldn't see that she was reluctant

"All right, then! Do you want to stay here or go to the bedroom?"

"Here, I think, Severus. This sofa is very large, and I can Transfigure it to eliminate the back, if you think it's necessary."

"No, no, this is fine." He was so pleased with his idea that he didn't seem to notice that Minerva had any reluctance.

Minerva sat back against the sofa as Severus moved around behind her. "Just a minute, Minerva. This potion can be quite staining, although I am sure the house-elves could clean it, best not to make a mess!" He patted her shoulder and hurried back into his bedroom, reemerging a moment later with a towel, which he placed behind her.

"Now, your hair. It is beautiful down, but I need to move it aside."

With a practised move, Minerva waved her wand and her hair was up in a loose bun.

"Oh! Good! That was very clever, Minerva."

She wanted to laugh. How many years had she put her hair up like that?

Severus rolled the collar of her dressing gown down. "Minerva? Can you move your nightgown a bit?"

With some unease, Minerva pulled her arms from the sleeves of the dressing gown, then unbuttoned the top few buttons of her nightgown, allowing Severus to move it aside a bit.

Minerva could hear him open the jar and a pungent aroma filled the room. It was peculiar, but not unpleasant. At his first gentle touch she felt a warmth spreading from the potion. Severus began to gently massage a small amount of the thick potion into her neck. She let her head fall forward a bit. Ah, it was a nice sensation. Her sore muscles felt better already. His hands moved to her trapezius muscles, and Minerva sighed as he rubbed more potion into them.

"Would you like me to do your shoulders, too, Minerva?"

Minerva hesitated only a moment before she unbuttoned one more button and lowered her nightgown down around her upper arms. She held her nightgown closed in front of her as Severus's hands massaged her shoulders, first lightly, then with a bit more pressure. Occasionally, he would stop and feel her muscle gently, find a spot, and apply targeted pressure to it. At her sharp intake of breath the first time he did this, he withdrew his hand and exclaimed, "Did I hurt you? I should have told you it might hurt a little when I did that. I'm so sorry!"

"No, it was fine, Severus. Go ahead. It was only unexpected."

When he finished massaging her neck and shoulders, he came around and sat beside her on the couch. "I could do your arms now, if you like."

Minerva had already pulled her nightgown back up. She buttoned it, then offered him an arm. He gently and carefully massaged the potion into her left arm, then moved to sit at her other side to massage her right one. "I don't want you to move more than you must, my darling." Minerva watched his face as he concentrated on massaging the potion into her skin. He looked so at peace, more so than she had ever seen him, she thought. He actually looked younger more his actual age than usual.

As he finished her right arm, the Floo flashed with green sparks and Albus stepped through. He smiled. "I am glad to find that all is well here and am happy to report that all is well in the rest of the castle."

Minerva, who had briefly forgotten that she was still in the castle, so odd was this experience, quirked a slight smile before asking, "And how is the deathly ill Transfiguration mistress?"

"Holding her own, as Poppy informed me," Albus said with a twinkle. "It may be touch-and-go for a few days. But I see that you have been well cared for in my absence."

"Yes, Severus kindly retrieved a potion from his rooms. He was giving me a massage my neck and shoulders feel much better for it. He had just finished my arms. I am feeling quite sleepy and ready for bed now!" She smiled, hoping that Albus wasn't bothered by Severus's attentions to her.

He smiled broadly, though, and said, "Thank you, Severus. Now I have a potion for you! It will help you sleep. It's not Dreamless Sleep, as that clearly was ineffective and you can't take it more than once a night. This potion you can take a second time if you wake up in the middle of the night. It does have a good deal of Kava and Poppy, so it will be anything but a dreamless sleep, I'm afraid, but I lowered the amount of Valerian and a few other ingredients, so you should be able to wake up easily if you have a nightmare."

"Albus, you know that I don't like to dream . . ."

"You don't dream?" Minerva asked, eyebrows raised.

"I practice Occlumency every night before I go to sleep. I rarely ever dream anymore."

"That's not healthy, Severus!"

"It's healthier than never sleeping, though, my love. Do not worry about me." He patted her hand.

"We *will* discuss this at some other time, Severus," the witch said with a stern glare. "No wonder you can barely be civil at times!"

"That's just my nasty personality, Minerva." He gave her hand another pat.

"Hmmpf. We *will* talk!" She turned to Albus. "I am going to bed now, Albus. Feel free to come in at any time."

"Very good, my dear I think we should leave the doors open tonight so that we can hear Severus if he needs us and so that he can come in at any time."

"Fine. Good-night, Severus," she said, turning to the younger wizard. "Thank you for the massage. It was lovely." She kissed his cheek before standing and going over to Albus. She took his hand and squeezed it. "I will see you shortly, won't I?"

"Yes, my love. I just need to speak with Severus for a moment." He leaned forward and pecked her on the lips as she raised her hand to caress his face.

Shortly after Minerva had crawled into bed, Wilsby popped in with a tray with two tall glasses. "Professor Snape says Professor Minerva and the Professor Headmaster must drink tonic water. I bring tonic water."

"Well, thank you, Wilsby. When did he tell you that?" Minerva was puzzled.

"Just now. Professor Snape calls and I come. The Professor Headmaster told me I is to come when Professor Snape calls me while he is here. Or if he needs me anywhere else in the next two days. He calls me 'Woopsy,' but I know he means me."

"I'll try to get him to remember your name. He's not himself right now."

"I know. He's being *nice*." Wilsby frowned, looking as though she didn't approve of a "nice" Professor Snape.

Minerva laughed. She had known Wilsby since she was a student and had come to appreciate the unusual Dumbledore house-elf. "Well, it won't last long, Wilsby. Don't worry. I rather like certain aspects of the 'new' Professor Snape, although I look forward to things returning to normal soon."

Wilsby settled the tray on the bedside table next to Minerva.

"Good-night, Professor Dumbledore's Professor Minerva!"

"Good-night, Wilsby." Minerva smiled as Wilsby popped away. She had never been able to completely break Wilsby of the habit of addressing her by that long circumlocution. She would always be identified as belonging to Professor Dumbledore, as far as Wilsby was concerned, and that was fine with Minerva.

She sipped some of the tonic water. What could Albus be talking to Severus about? He would tell her, she was sure. It was kind of Severus to call Wilsby and ask for the tonic water for both of them. As the *Adfectus* deepened its hold on him, it seemed to break down more of his barriers. His cognitive abilities were in decline, although they seemed to come and go, depending on how strongly the imperative was expressing itself at the time. And it was good of him to go fetch the potions for her. She had left them in the sitting room, but perhaps Albus would bring them in with him. He really needed to take better care of himself. She had struggled for years to get him to do that, and he seemed to be worse about it in the last few years than he ever had been before. The situation with Voldemort and Harry Potter was a terrible strain on him; he felt such responsibility for everything. Minerva had told him time and time again that he was just one man and that he shouldn't become so upset with himself when he failed to be perfect. He did the best he could, which was better than anyone else could or *did* do.

Albus came in, Levitating the two potions. It was fortunate for him that his magic was as strong as it was; he was using it more for simple physical tasks than she had ever seen him do in the entire time she knew him. Of course, if he hadn't been as strong as he was, he never would have been in the position to have his hand cursed as it was or else it would have killed him. Minerva swallowed her tears at that thought and smiled at him, instead. "I see you have our potions! Severus said I could share with you."

"That was very good of him, Minerva." He settled the potions on the night stand on his side of the bed. He slipped off his shoes and lay beside Minerva, but without getting under the covers. "It was especially good of him because " He hesitated.

"Because what?"

"It appears he didn't simply hear a few tell-tale sounds after Flooing in, my dear." He looked at her, judging her reaction to his words. "He actually . . . he didn't realise at first what was happening. The door was open. He saw us in the mirror."

Minerva blanched then reddened. "*What?*" she asked, her voice tight. "Did he tell you this? Did he stand there and watch us?" Minerva could only imagine what his reaction must have been did he stand there and . . . *pleasure* himself while watching them? She felt vaguely nauseated and set her tonic water back on its tray. She had let him touch her again after that. What had been going through his head?

Albus cast an Imperturbable. "No, not exactly. He didn't tell me the details, but . . . I shouldn't have, Minerva, but I eavesdropped some ~~not~~ full Legilimency. And after this is all over, I will tell him and apologise. His Occlumency shields are practically non-existent. As we were talking, he was practically projecting his thoughts at me. He had found it quite disturbing to see, actually. It was inadvertent that he saw us, and it was uncomfortable for him on a number of levels. I didn't pry into that, though. What he told me, when I asked him, was that he had come in, he thought we were just talking, and so he walked up to the door. What he saw in the mirror shocked him. He actually said only that he had been 'unprepared' for what he saw, but from the anxiety and discomfort he was radiating, I think the term 'shock' is more apt."

"What *did* he see, Albus?" Minerva asked faintly.

"He came up to the door just before I began my after-dinner treat, so to speak. He didn't watch long. I think he only stood there for as long as he did because he was taken aback by what he saw."

"He's a grown wizard, Albus. How could he have been taken aback or shocked by it? Was it an effect of the spell?" Minerva was perturbed.

"Partially. I think he normally would have retreated as quickly as possible, if he weren't under the influence of the *Adfectus*. But that is only part of it. His sexual experience is rather limited and has been shaped by the relationships or the *lack* of relationships he has had. We didn't talk about it in detail, but I did tell him that what he saw was a normal part of many couples' love-making, that what a couple enjoyed doing with each other was a matter of personal preference, and that most couples engage in more than one type of sexual practice with each other. I do think we need to have more of a talk later, though. I think it's important that I emphasise the importance of adult consensual sex that brings pleasure to both parties or that, at the very minimum, hurts neither of them." At Minerva's wide-eyed expression, he added, "It's not that he has no concept of mutual consent, my dear, or of the possibility of shared pleasure in a sexual tryst. It's more that he is emotionally stunted. And, as far as he is concerned, you are very nearly a goddess."

"So he didn't stand there and watch and take some kind of voyeuristic pleasure in it with the two of us completely clueless. God, I wish I had closed the door! I was just so eager to see you."

"No, he didn't. The reason he was all wet is that he took a cold shower." Albus sighed. "I would almost prefer it if he had returned to his room for a good wank."

"Albus Dumbledore! What on earth!"

"I said *almost*, Minerva. It's just that that might have been a slightly *more normal* reaction to becoming aroused, that's all. He's a very confused young man."

"Lovely," Minerva groused. "It's bad enough he was hit by the *Adfectus* and it turns out that *I'm* his true love, but the boy is confused, emotionally stunted, and sexually unsophisticated. And possibly even repressed. Just *lovely!*"

"I am going to lift the Imperturbable in a moment, Minerva, but first, I would like to make a suggestion."

"What?" Minerva sighed.

"It's about the massage "

"Did it bother you that I let him do that, Albus? I only allowed him to massage my neck, shoulders, and arms. And he seemed so glad to do it. And now that I'm reassured he wasn't imagining what he had seen earlier, I think it was a positive way for him to exercise the imperative."

"No, it didn't bother me. Quite the contrary. Especially now that I am unable to give you a proper massage don't protest, Minerva; it's the truth. And Severus looked particularly relaxed, far better than I had anticipated after having seen him just before I left. No, I was going to suggest that you have him give you more massages."

"What? Why?"

"It will help both of you become more comfortable with each other. It will increase your sense of intimacy."

Minerva winced. "I don't particularly *want* to increase my 'sense of intimacy' with him, Albus."

"There are levels of intimacy, Minerva. If you do have to engage in sexual activity with him, I think you would be more comfortable with him if you had already become used to his touch, that's all I mean. It occurred to me as soon as I came in the room. You needn't use this suggestion, of course. It was just an idea, that's all. I also thought it might not be a bad thing if you also were to give him a brief massage or two, as well, but that is, again, just a suggestion for you to think about."

Just as Albus was about to lift the Imperturbable, Minerva said, "Wait. There's something I need to discuss with you before we lose our privacy again. It's something that I thought of this evening, as well. I just need your blessing, Albus." She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"It's not that I *want* to do this, you understand. It's just that under the circumstances . . . I suppose it's somewhat like your idea." She sighed. "I would like to have some

control of the situation, as much as possible. I realised this evening that at some point, Severus is likely to kiss me." She looked at Albus. "I mean really kiss me."

"I know what you mean."

She took a deep breath, "Well, I think I would like to kiss him, first." Minerva looked up at him, trying to gauge his reaction. "If you don't want me to "

"No, no, Minerva. I think it is a fine idea. Eminently sensible, in fact. It will help you to have some control over the situation. I think it will also be more pleasant for you if you initiate it. And, of course, it might help Severus, as well. But my primary concern is you. Minerva, you must do whatever you need to do in order to feel good and comfortable in this bizarre situation. No matter what it is. Even if you wanted me to leave this minute. And you needn't ever explain why, or worry whether I will understand, or anything of that sort, all right?"

"No! I don't want you to leave you aren't going to go yet, are you?" She reached out and took hold of his arm as though she were afraid he was about to depart at that very moment.

"No not until I need to go teach your classes tomorrow." He smiled gently and caressed her face. "I have decided, by the way, to teach only the fifth, sixth, and seventh year classes; I hope you don't mind. The others will simply have to be caught up when you're back but we can talk about that later. What is important now is that you know that you must do whatever you feel you need to do in this situation. Do you understand me, my love?"

"Yes. And I appreciate it. More than I could have two days ago, before reality had completely kicked in. I never would have dreamed on Friday night that I would say that I wanted to initiate a kiss with Severus. But I don't want to feel . . . *used*, like an object. Just waiting for him to take the next step. It's not enough anymore to simply stop Severus before he goes further than I wish. Can you understand that, Albus?"

"Completely. And you are not one to lie back and simply allow yourself to be used. You have been so remarkable patient and kind to Severus. I am very proud of you." He kissed her lightly. "You are more wonderful than Severus could ever know," he said slightly hoarsely, and kissed her again. "May I lift the Imperturbable now?"

"Yes, thank you. And it is *you* who are wonderful and remarkable. I hope that Severus has some appreciation of that."

"Don't hit him over the head with it, Minerva. He is fighting a good deal of envy right now, as it is. I don't want him to feel indebted to me. No more than he already does." Albus lifted the Imperturbable. "I am going to get ready for bed now."

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I'm sure I'll be fine. I'll let you know if I do, though."

"Be sure to take a dose of this potion, Albus. I'm not going to take mine until you take yours! And don't dally. You need to get more sleep tonight than you've been getting lately. I had several naps today, and you didn't. You need to take better care of yourself, Albus. If I have to, I'll send Wilsby after you tomorrow to make sure you take a nap!"

"Yes, Mother McGonagall!" Albus said with a chuckle, using the teasing term of affection he had begun using when she was still a student.

"Oh, *hush*, Albus!" But Minerva laughed, at ease at the end of a long and trying day.

Note: In case anyone is curious, Hellebore is a plant that contains poisonous alkaloids. It's also associated with magic, witchcraft, murder, suicide, and various dark arts.

Melampus of Pylos was a seer in Greek mythology. Two magical snakes licked his ears while he slept, endowing him with the ability to understand the speech of animals. The story that Severus and Minerva speak of comes from a Greek myth about Melampus.

Eight: Dreams and Dunderheads

Chapter 8 of 16

Severus struggles through another night and day. He enlists Hermione's assistance.
A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Eight: Dreams and Dunderheads

Their sleep was interrupted by a bloodcurdling shriek followed by sobbing and shouts of, "No, no!"

Minerva was first out of bed. She was across the sitting room to Snape's room before Albus managed to sit up. She reflexively lit a candle in one of the wall sconces. Severus was tangled in his sheet, moaning, thrashing, and crying out in terror.

"Severus! Severus! Wake up! It's a dream; wake up! It's Minerva! Severus!" When he merely cried more loudly and shouted her name but without waking up, Minerva decided to risk his flailing limbs and reached out and shook his shoulder. By that time, Albus had come into the room. "Severus! It's Minerva. I'm here! I thought you said he would wake up easily, Albus?"

Albus said, "Perhaps more light would help." He lit the rest of the candles in the wall sconces.

Minerva took shook Severus again, trying to restrain his arms with one of her own. Just as she did that, Severus stopped struggling and opened his eyes. He moaned, then said, "Minerva? Minerva? Oh, you're here. You're all right!" He reached out and grasped her arms.

"Yes, I'm here, Severus. You were having a nightmare."

"It was dreadful. They had taken you, Minerva. I couldn't stop them, and they were doing terrible, awful things to you. It was just . . ." He began to cry with deep, heaving sobs.

"Sh, sh, Severus. I'm all right. I'm well. It was only a nightmare." She sat on the edge of the bed. She felt Albus put a hand on her shoulder before he kissed the top of her head. "I am going to go back to our room, if that's all right with you, Minerva," he said softly.

Minerva looked up and nodded. "I will be there soon, Albus."

"Take all the time you need, my dear. I will be there when you return."

Severus had let go of Minerva and turned his face into his pillow, stuffing the corner of it in his mouth as he tried to choke off his sobs. Minerva lay down beside him, pushing the sheets aside, and gently eased him from the pillow. "Come here, Severus. My shoulder is much better than that pillow but you must promise not to bite!" she said lightly as she drew him into her arms. She held him and rocked him against her as his gulping sobs subsided, and she held him still as he ran out of tears.

"I'm so sorry, Minerva. So sorry."

"Don't be sorry, dear. Do you want to tell me about the dream?" She pushed his hair back from his face and gently wiped his tears from his cheeks with her hand.

"No. No. I can't. It was terrible, though. Like other nightmares I've had, but worse, because it was you this time." Tears began to well up in his eyes again.

"Well, as you can see, I am fine. I understand why you had the nightmare, though." She continued to hold him and gently rubbed his back as he rested his head on her. "When this is all over, you really should try lucid dreaming rather than using Occlumency before you go to sleep. You don't have anyone trying to break into your mind while you sleep, after all and lucid dreaming would allow you to wake up if someone were to try. And I have a feeling you are overusing Occlumency when you are awake, as well. You are an excellent Occlumens, Severus. Albus says you are the best he has ever encountered, in fact. But you should broaden your range of practices. I think you are using Occlumency to suppress too much, too often. In the end, you have a rebound effect. I think it's even affecting your response to the *Adfectus*, since it seems you are so thoroughly emotionally affected by it, and not just with regard to your feelings for me. This is not unexpected, as you know, but it does seem to be stronger in your case than one would normally expect at this point."

"All right," he sighed. "I suppose I can try. Maybe you could help me?" he asked.

"If you would like my help, I will be glad to give it. I am not as talented an Occlumens as you are, but I have mastered several techniques that I think would help you. At the very least, I can listen to you and provide encouragement as you try different things."

"I don't think I have any Occlumency shields left, Minerva. I am completely open. If the Dark Lord were to call me now . . . I couldn't go. You'd lose your spy. If I went, he would see it all, every treachery I have committed against him and every plan we have made. It would be disastrous."

"Is he likely to call you soon?" Minerva tried not to let her alarm show.

"No. I think it will be another few weeks, at least. He's fairly predictable, although he is becoming less so. Still, I doubt he will call me during the week. And if word gets back to him that I've gone to Mongolia for Dumbledore, he definitely won't call me until I return. He will probably see such a mission as a sign that Albus is growing more trusting of me . . . He will hope that I have new information for him." Severus sighed. "Albus and I will have to work out what I will tell him the next time he calls me. There's always got to be truth mingled with plausible fictions. And I have to make the fiction indistinguishable from the truth when he looks into my mind."

"I think we should wait to think about those things you should, anyway. Just devote your energy to dealing with the *Adfectus*, all right, Severus?"

He nodded. "Again, I recognise how very fortunate I have been that you are my true love, Minerva. I am sure that the opposite is true for you, though." He blinked back tears.

Minerva said, "I must say that it is still a surprise to me that I would be the one you love, and I wouldn't be truthful if I didn't admit that I wish I weren't in this situation, but I *am* glad I can help you, Severus, and that it wasn't some witch who would not care for you as you should be cared for."

"You are very kind, Minerva. So very kind and generous." He lay his head back on the pillow next to hers and faced her. "It is not just the spell speaking, Minerva, when I tell you that I can think of no other witch who can come close to comparing with you." He gently caressed her cheek. When she smiled slightly, he continued his caress down her throat to her chest. His tentative touch proceeded further down as he brushed lightly across her breast then down her side to her hip before moving his fingers to her arm in a gentle caress back up to her shoulder, her throat, and her cheek. "You are so beautiful, Minerva. And so good." He ran his fingers into her hair then rested his palm on her cheek.

"How are you feeling now, Severus?"

"Better. Not well, exactly, but better. You can go, if you need to."

"No, I can stay a while longer. I want you to be able to sleep peacefully when I leave. I will fetch you another dose of the sleeping potion before I go."

"All right, Minerva. As you like. But . . . may I . . ."

"What, Severus?"

"May I touch you again, as I just did?" he whispered.

"Yes, you may."

Severus half-closed his eyes as he blissfully ran his fingers down her throat and along her collarbone before lightly brushing his fingertips against her breast. "You are so beautiful, Minerva. Would you mind . . . may I tell you . . ."

"Yes?"

"Your breasts are lovely, Minerva," he whispered. Even in the candlelight, Minerva could see his blush.

"Thank you." What could one say to that?

When he had told her that her breasts were lovely, his fingers had paused, resting on the side of her breast. Now he tentatively caressed just the side of her breast, his eyes fixed on the object of his attention.

Minerva took his hand from her breast and kissed it. "That was very nice, Severus, but I think it's enough for me at the moment."

Severus nodded and turned onto his back, pulling away from her. He cleared his throat. "I am sorry I made you uncomfortable."

"Not yet, Severus," Minerva said, thinking, though, that she still wouldn't describe herself as precisely *comfortable* having him touch her breast. "Just trying to save something for later, hmm?"

He nodded.

"Would you like the potion now, or would you like to talk a bit longer? We could go into the sitting room for a little while, if you like."

"I don't know . . . I know I don't want to be parted from you, but I also want you to be able to sleep. And I am afraid of another nightmare."

"How about this: we get up, have a cup of chamomile tea together, talk a bit, then I'll stay with you when you take the potion and as you fall asleep. How does that sound?"

Severus smiled. "I'd like that. Thank you."

"All right. I am going to just let Albus know, if he is still awake, that you are all right, then we can call Wilspy and get some tea."

Sitting with him on the sofa later, drinking tea, Minerva felt quite peculiar. There was something very normal about what they were doing, and yet the circumstances were completely bizarre. Not to mention that she had never seen Severus smile as often as he had in the last few days. Of course, he was breaking down in tears, as well, but it was very nice to see him smile and relax. Perhaps he might learn something about how to enjoy life when this incident was over. Remembering what his life was like, though, Minerva doubted it. Again, compassion for her friend ached in her heart. She would try to make this as positive for him as possible. Something that he could hold onto later. Perhaps when Voldemort was gone, he would remember it, and it would give him hope that he could have some happiness in his life and that he could find someone else to share it with.

Finally, at three o'clock, after they had talked about several things, including his confused feelings toward Remus Lupin, Minerva suggested that they return to bed. "I will stay with you until you fall asleep. How long does it take for this potion to work?"

"Just a minute or two, but it's not as fast as Dreamless Sleep. It will be nice to have you stay with me."

Minerva returned to the bedroom she shared with Albus and found the sleeping potion. She poured the dose into a small cup and returned to the sitting room. "Ready?"

They went into Severus's bedroom. Minerva put a freshening charm on the sheets and straightened them. Before he got into bed, Minerva placed the sleeping draught on the night stand.

"Severus, I would like to do something that might help keep the nightmares at bay. It might not, but we can try, if you like."

"What?" Severus furrowed his brow. Nothing could keep his nightmares at bay without Occlumency or Dreamless Sleep.

"Take off your pyjama top and lie down on top of the bed if you want to. I thought I might give you a little massage."

"Oh, you don't need to do that, Minerva! It's better if you don't, really." He grasped at his pyjama top as if he believed she might rip it from him.

"All right, as you wish, Severus. I just thought it would relax you. It might help you sleep. And I would have liked to do it for you. But if you'd rather I didn't . . ."

"You *want* to?"

Minerva nodded.

"I really don't think you'd like to, Minerva." He swallowed. "I'm not much to look at. And . . . there's the matter of my left arm." He averted his gaze from hers.

"I've seen it before, Severus. It's not likely to bother me. And if my touching it is a problem, if ~~he~~ *he* could tell, then I will be careful to avoid it."

"No, only if it's active could he tell if someone were touching it. And he probably couldn't tell who it was. But it's an ugly, evil thing, Minerva, something you should not be subject to."

"I promise you that it won't traumatize me, Severus. There is something else bothering you. Is it just that you are . . . shy?"

"You really don't want to know, Minerva."

"Severus, one thing I *really* hate is having people tell me what I do and do not want. What is it? If you can't tell me, fine, but don't behave as though I am the one stopping you!"

"I'm very ugly, Minerva," he said softly. "And my body's uglier than what you can see. I know this. You don't need to humour me. You should not be subject to my ugliness."

Minerva shook her head. She came closer to him and reached up and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. "If you really don't want me to do this, I will stop, but otherwise . . ."

Severus dropped his hands and closed his eyes as Minerva slowly unbuttoned his pyjama top. When she was done, she opened it part way. Despite the pale light, she could make out many long, thin scars on his chest. Deciding that she would wonder later what had caused them and when he had received them, she gently placed her palms on his chest and drew them down to his stomach, noting the meagre flesh covering his rib cage. Bringing her hands back up to his shoulders, she eased the shirt from him, and he allowed it to drop away from his body.

Minerva placed one hand on each shoulder. "Open your eyes, Severus."

He opened them.

Minerva grinned a lopsided smile. "I haven't fainted in shock yet, have I?"

He tried to return her smile, but with little success.

"What is it that you didn't want me to see, Severus?"

"My ugliness. All of it."

"Nothing particular, then?"

"No . . . Except I have a chicken breast," he said, flushing in shame.

"What? Did someone tell you that? What foolishness!" Minerva gently but firmly ran a hand down and across his chest and lower ribs. "No, you have a fine build, Severus. You are well proportioned, and you most certainly do *not* have a 'chicken breast'! Whoever said that must have been envious of you in some way. You do look as though you could stand to eat a bit more than you do, but I already knew that, and it can't come as a surprise to you to hear it."

Severus listened as he stood there tautly. "I have scars."

"We all have scars, Severus. They are marks on the skin. That's all they are. And yours don't seem bad."

Before he could stop himself, Severus said, "You haven't seen my back yet." He winced.

Minerva walked around him. Yes, even in this bad light, she could see the traces of many scars, apparently from varied causes, but they were all fairly smooth, and it looked as though he had healed well from the injuries. She really didn't think she wanted to know their origins, though. After examining his back a moment, she ran both hands over it, much as she had his chest, and Severus flinched slightly at her initial touch. Minerva came back around and faced him.

"They are marks, Severus. While I wish you hadn't had the pain that must have occurred when they were created, they are only marks." She held up her hands to him. "You were concerned that I shouldn't be subject to the sight of them, but see? I am just as I was. They didn't rub off; they didn't cause me to faint or run from the room in terror. It's just you. Your chest. Your back. The body of Severus Snape, my friend. Nothing ugly or disgusting about it. Truly."

"Really?"

"Really. I wouldn't lie about something like that. If I found them disgusting, I would simply refrain from saying anything."

A sudden smile lit Severus's face and tears came to his eyes. "I . . . that's . . . I . . . thank you."

Minerva smiled slightly. "You're welcome, Severus. Now if you would lie down on your stomach, I can give you a bit of a massage not a very long one, I'm afraid. I think we both need our sleep."

Still smiling, Severus complied with Minerva's request. As she began to knead his shoulders, she said, "I'll give you another one of these tomorrow. Perhaps with some kind of nice scented oil something masculine. You needn't worry that I'll make you smell sweet and floral."

As she rubbed his back and felt Severus relax under her hands, Minerva recognised the wisdom of Albus's suggestion. Not only did she feel less uneasy with Severus physically, but she felt closer to him, as well. Her compassion was evoked by his clearly distorted self-image and the thought of what the various scars on his body must mean. Albus must know about the scars. He had seen Severus in the infirmary when he was being treated for various things. Perhaps that was one reason Albus had suggested it. Or he may be so accustomed to them, he never gave them thought. The latter was more likely, since he probably would have warned her otherwise. Although they really *hadn't* bothered her, except for the fact that he had them at all.

She stopped after only a few minutes. "I will give you a better one tomorrow. Perhaps after a long day of dealing with 'dunderheads!'"

Minerva stood, and Severus rolled over, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a relaxed sigh. He smiled. "Thank you, Minerva. I know I have told you before, but you truly are the most wonderful woman ever to have walked the earth."

"I really rather doubt that, Severus," Minerva replied, feeling somewhat guilty as she thought of her impatience with him and some of the less-than-charitable thoughts she had had about him during the past few days. "But it is good of you to think so. Now get in bed and I will give you the potion."

Minerva helped him don his pyjama top, arranged his covers, and smoothed his hair back from his face. Before taking the potion from the night stand, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. "If you dream, remember that all is well and that I am fine and that you can come find me when you wake up." She kissed his cheek again, then helped him sit up enough to drink down the potion.

Minerva sat and held Severus's hand as he looked at her, his eyes blinking, then finally closing. When his breathing became deep and regular, she doused the candles and headed back to Albus and to bed.

When Severus awoke, grey dawn was leaking through the heavy draperies drawn across the windows that flanked the bed. He felt strange. His tongue was fuzzy, his head felt heavy, and he felt oddly limp. Nonetheless, the spell's imperative forced the groggy wizard out of bed and stumbling toward his beloved; the spell ignored even his full bladder in its drive to have him act in accordance with its command.

Bleary-eyed, Severus staggered into Albus and Minerva's room. In the darkened room, he could just make out their figures on the bed. Albus was lying on the side closest to the door. Severus, unable even to think of their need for sleep or for privacy, or of anything but his love, came around the foot of the bed. He could now see that Albus was wrapped around Minerva again, much as he had been the previous day, his withered hand resting on a small pillow in front of her. Their heads shared the same pillow, and with Minerva's head tucked slightly under Albus's, his face partially buried in her hair, one had the impression that Albus was kissing the top of her head even as they slept.

Severus rounded the bed, the imperative impelling him forward. The tiny sliver of rational-Severus watched himself, disgusted. Severus knelt beside the bed; the command of the *Actus Affectus* warred with his genuine love for Minerva and his concern for the one man who had ever truly cared for him. He reached out a hand. It hovered above her arm before, with great effort, Severus withdrew it. There was little clear to him but two things: He loved Minerva. But he also loved Albus. He had always rebelled whenever the older wizard had expressed affection toward him, but, even with no spell acting on him with regard to the Headmaster, Severus had absolutely no doubt that he loved the old wizard whose kindness and forgiveness had given him a new life.

Severus sat back on his heels and lowered his forehead to rest on the edge of the bed, hugging his arms to himself, fighting the imperative, silent tears rising in his eyes and rolling down his face.

The others slept on. Losing his battle with the *Affectus*, Severus raised his head and was about to speak his beloved's name when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, an unfamiliar blue potion bottle on the dresser across from the bed. It wasn't one of his. Albus's writing was on it. The sleeping potion.

Like a somnambulist, his eyes glazed, Severus rolled back from the bed and stood in a fluid movement unlike the faltering ones that had brought him to the room. He stepped over to the dresser.

"Dreaming Sleep Potion, Potent" was written on the label. The bottle was more than three quarters full. He had had two doses. That meant there was . . . Severus's fuzzy brain rebelled at the calculation. There was a lot left. Much more than two doses. He reached for the bottle. He would dream and sleep, till he slept and dreamt no more. Just as his fingers closed around the bottle, he heard a rusty voice behind him.

"Severus? What are you doing, my boy?" Albus had awoken and turned his head to see Severus at the dresser.

"Nothing, Albus." He stood still, his fingers locked around the bottle.

"Nothing?"

Beside Albus, Minerva turned and stretched. "Severus what have you there?"

"I " Severus swallowed and lowered his head, not answering, but not loosening his hold on the bottle, either.

Minerva got out of bed and came around to him. Carefully, she reached for the bottle. "It's too late for another dose this morning, Severus," she said quietly, deliberately misstating his intent.

"Not if I take enough," he croaked, but he let her take the potion from his hand.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I should have put this away last night. Why don't you and I go into the sitting room for a bit and Albus can take care of this for us?"

Docile, Severus allowed Minerva to lead him out of the room. He sat on the sofa with no prompting, and Minerva settled beside him.

"Severus, look at me."

Severus slowly raised his head. Minerva stroked his cheek lightly. "Let's take care of the imperative now, Severus, then you can shave and dress, and we can talk about the other later."

Severus nodded. "I didn't want to wake you."

"I know, Severus, but it is almost my usual time to rise. You slept this whole time?"

Severus nodded and took her hand. "I haven't slept like that since . . . I don't remember." He tentatively reached out to embrace her, and Minerva allowed him to take her in his arms. "I love you more than my life, Minerva. And I realised something else, too. Something that cut through the imperative and allowed me, for at least a few moments, to resist waking you. Albus . . . Albus means so much to me. And he loves you so. I see it clearly now even when I am completely in the thrall of the curse. I cannot do this anymore. You must see that. We will not find a counter-curse or a potion to rid me of the *Adfectus*. We are merely prolonging the inevitable. I will shave and dress because you wish it, my most darling one, but then I want you to reconsider my request."

"Severus. I think we need to talk about this in greater detail, but later. Not now. All right, dear?"

"As you wish, Minerva. Always as you wish." His voice cracked. "I do not want to invade your privacy any longer, my love. You must now loathe me, loathe my touch. How can you bear my embrace?"

"Do you learn *nothing*, Severus?" Minerva sat back to look at him. "Do you not remember that when you woke last night, I was there? That when you wished to remain awake a while, I stayed? That as you fell asleep, I was still there with you?"

"Forgive me, Minerva! You must think I am the most ungrateful wizard you have ever met." More tears gathered in his eyes.

"Hush, do not worry. I didn't say those things because I believe you to be ungrateful or because I want anything from you for myself, but because I do not want you to devalue yourself as you do. If I loathed your touch, I doubt we would have made it past Saturday morning, and I certainly would not have rubbed your back to help you fall asleep last night." Minerva shook her head. "It is like shouting into a void. Almost as though you cannot hear me, cannot believe me. Severus, I cannot continue to repeat to you that I do this because I am your friend, I care about you, and I want you to live. It is very wearing. Please, though, any time you are about to say or even to *think* that I loathe you or your touch, recall all I have done the last few days and all the liberties I have allowed you. Do not even bother thinking about what I have said my words do not seem to persuade you. But think about my actions and ask yourself if you believe that I would do those things if I truly loathed you."

"I will try, Minerva. But it is difficult. I loathe myself. I cannot imagine that a woman, a witch, *alady*, such as yourself could do anything but loathe me, as well."

"Nonetheless, if you could try to refrain from saying such things, I would appreciate whatever efforts you are able to make. ~~don't~~ loathe you, but I *do* find it more than tiresome to have to continually hear how I surely must!"

Severus nodded.

"I think you should go dress now, Severus. We can spend a little more time together after that. I really need a cup of tea not to mention that I'd like to get dressed. And we also have to plan your day."

Three hours later, Severus had finished teaching his first class and had fifteen minutes before the next one began. He walked rapidly the short distance from his classroom to his office, whispering the new password, opening the door, and quickly shutting it behind him. As soon as the door closed, Minerva transformed from her Animagus form into her ordinary form and sealed the door with *Colloportus*, then placed two different versions of the Imperturbable on it for good measure. Severus stepped toward her and Minerva took his outstretched hands.

"How was it?"

"I don't know. Fine, fine. They were first-years." Severus took Minerva in his arms and held her tightly. "Gods, Minerva, being around them all, knowing that I might fall apart at any moment! I thought of you almost constantly. I finally had them just write an essay for the last half of the class. They probably thought I was quite mad, the way I stalked about shouting at them about their wand technique but never demonstrating it or even telling them what was wrong. For all I know, they were doing everything perfectly! I couldn't pay any attention at all."

"We spent several minutes together just before you went in, though." They had Flooed directly to his office from the secret suite and had sat together on a small sofa that Minerva had Transfigured from two of his stiff-backed chairs.

"I just could think only of you, my darling. I cannot do this. I will not make it through the day. And the next class is my sixth-year NEWTs class. And you know who is in that. Between Draco and Potter, one of them or worse, both is bound to find my behaviour noteworthy. Draco will just snicker up his sleeve if he notices, but he'll tell Bella, which amounts to the same thing as telling the Dark Lord. And Potter . . . if *he* notices, that would be worse. The boy can't hold his tongue. He cheeked me within five minutes of the start of the very first class of this year. I could handle him then, but now if he were to do that today, I don't think I could deal with it at all. I will lose the respect of the entire class. I cannot teach them how to defend themselves if they do not respect me, Minerva. The way I've felt recently, and the fact that he is so like his father, if he says something to me . . . the students are likely to begin calling me 'Snivellus' again!" The prospect of that brought tears to his eyes.

"Come, sit with me. We have at least ten more minutes before you have to leave. We talked about this already, remember? Get the students to teach each other tell them you have a bet riding on the outcome, or some such nonsense. Hermione is sure to co-operate; she'll see immediately what you are doing. You will have an ally in the classroom."

"All right. I will try. And if it doesn't work, I will try to act enraged, as I usually do. But it is hard now. It's as though all my anger and resentment and envy have been subsumed by this curse. I can only feel self-loathing I will not speak of it to you, I know but I can only feel that, despair, sorrow, and my love for you, my darling!"

"You felt affection for Albus this morning. Try feeling affection for your students or at least tolerance and a sense of . . . care. They ~~are~~ under your care, Severus. You are responsible for them. That should inspire some positive feelings in you, don't you think?"

"I don't know, my love, but I will try it. I will think of you, and I will try." He nuzzled her neck. "You are so beautiful, so wise, so absolutely . . . wonderful." He kissed her neck again before enfolding her in his arms. "I wish I could protect you from all harm, Minerva. Keep all hurt and sadness from you. I wish I could be your guardian forever and ever. I do love you so!"

"I know you do, Severus."

Minerva looked up at him. His deep brown eyes, so dark they looked almost as black as his pupils, gazed down at her. So different from Albus's bright blue ones. He was so different in so many ways. Poor man. For some reason, the comparison between Severus and Albus caused a clenching ache in her for the wizard who sat beside her, arms draped loosely around her, looking at her with such unadulterated adoration. He would remember all of this. All of the tears, all of the revelations he had made, all of the pain . . . Minerva's own eyes filled with tears. Had this spell lost her a friend? A friend who needed her friendship, but who might reject it once he was no longer under the influence of the *Adfectus*? She raised her hand to caress his cheek.

"Minerva, my love, what is it? Why do you cry?"

"I am hoping that after this is over, I have not lost you as a friend, Severus. Especially now that I have come to know you better. I hope that we can still argue over

Quidditch and that I can berate you for the points you take and you can rant about the dunderheads needing to learn lessons . . . If you cannot be my friend any longer after this is over, that will be the worst thing about this entire experience for me."

"Of course I shall be your friend, Minerva! How could you think otherwise? After all you have done for me, after all the kindness you have shown me? Do you think me that much an ungrateful bastard, then?"

"No, Severus, but I do know that you are proud. I believe that I remember the uncursed Severus Snape better than you do, at the moment. But do not worry about that now. You have a little more than five minutes before your next class."

"I will do as you suggest to handle the students, or try some version of it. Perhaps Miss Granger could be enlisted, as you say . . ." He sighed.

"Severus, I think you should act on the imperative more than you are. You need all of your wits about you or as much of them as you can gather!" she said with a wry smile.

Severus smiled down at her, not minding the joke at his expense. He bent his head and kissed her forehead. "You are . . . everything I have said you are, and more, Minerva McGonagall." He pressed his lips to her forehead again, then made his way to her neck; one hand moved to lightly stroked her side through her robe. His hand moved up toward her breast as his lips found their way to the hollow of her throat. He gently cupped her breast through her robe and trailed kisses down to her décolletage. His lips skimmed her skin where it met the neckline of her robes.

Minerva gently urged Severus to sit up away from her, but allowed his hand to remain where it had come to rest. She swallowed as she looked into his unfocussed eyes. This would be . . . an *investment*, of sorts. If she were to do this at all, it would be best to do it when it could help him help carry him through the next hour, at least. She raised a hand and lightly stroked his face.

"Severus, we are friends. I am your friend. I always will be; you can always come to me. I hope you do not turn away from me when this is over. Things will not be entirely the same, I know. And certainly they will not be as they are now." Minerva caressed Severus comfortingly when a look of pain crossed his face at her words. "But you can always come and talk to me, Severus. And if you ever need a hug, I can give you one. Although I do hope your need for them is not as frequent as it is now!" she said, trying to joke, but at seeing his downcast expression, she added softly, "But as you *do* need them frequently now, they are yours . . . as is this, Severus."

Minerva trailed her fingers down from his temple, along his jaw, and up to his mouth, where she traced his lips, much as he had done to her the day before. She caressed his cheek then combed her fingers into his hair and gently pulled him toward her as she reached up to meet him. Her lips lightly touched his once, then twice. She pulled back only slightly before approaching his mouth with her own again, gently kissing him, one hand threaded through his fine black hair, one hand resting on his shoulder. He reacted only slightly at first, but as she extended her third kiss, he pulled her closer and pressed his mouth into hers. Somewhat too hard, Minerva thought as she carefully disengaged from the kiss, but she doubted he had had much experience with such things. From what Albus had said, she presumed he had accumulated most of his experience by frequenting prostitutes in Knockturn Alley.

Severus sat back, stunned. He touched his lips. "Why . . . ?"

"Because you needed it, Severus. You should go soon. How do you feel?"

"I'm not sure . . . well, I am, but I can't say." He averted his eyes.

"Ah. Well. I see. A good blast of a Cooling Charm can take care of that before you leave for class if it hasn't subsided before then."

"What? Oh, no! I didn't mean that, well, that is also there, um, just a little," he stuttered, blushing. "No, I can't say because you told me this morning that you didn't want to hear me say anything about your loathing to touch me."

Minerva started to chuckle, then she laughed out loud. "Oh, Severus, you really are quite precious sometimes! A witch, whom you love, kisses you, and all you can think is that she must loathe touching you!"

"Well, no, not exactly." He blushed. "I was thinking that maybe you meant what you said, and you really *don't* loathe me."

"That's progress, then. Now, how is the spell doing? Do you think you can make it through the next hour?"

Severus smiled. "I am sure I can. But I will have to remember not to walk about with a smile on my face. They will be even more likely to think I've gone mad than the students in my last class!"

That elicited another chuckle from Minerva. Before he left, she cast a Glamour on him to replicate his normal pallor, rather than the blush that currently graced his cheeks. He declined her offer of a Cooling Charm aimed at his "nether regions," as she called them, saying that all of the layers he wore had many advantages and obscuring his current problem was one of them.

Severus moved through the knot of students gathered in front of the door to his classroom. The students parted for him automatically, something that normally pleased Snape. Now, he barely noticed, he was so euphoric following Minerva's kiss. He opened the door to let them in and heard a familiar whisper behind him.

"No luck. Doesn't look like the git is sick yet."

Another familiar and despised voice responded mirthfully, "Yeah, but there's still hope!"

He was just about to whirl around and, in an attempt to maintain his reputation, take points when a third voice hissed, "Can't you ~~two~~ ever stop! He was a *hero*! If Professor McGonagall could hear you "

"If Professor McGonagall could hear you," said Snape, turning, "I doubt very much she would be particularly pleased. But she is in isolation, the result of something very *nasty* and very *deadly*. And her *cubs* are making jokes about it." His eyes narrowed. "Weasley, Potter, I will leave you to your Head of House. When she recovers *You*, Miss Granger, will see me after class."

The class went smoothly, to Severus's surprise. Weasley and Potter, having apparently felt at least a twinge of Gryffindor conscience no doubt about their Head of House, not about what they'd said of him kept quiet. Potter, to Snape's surprise, had a little more success with his nonverbal spell-casting than usual. That was essential for him to master if he were ever to have a chance of defeating the Dark Lord. Severus encouraged him the only way he knew how and given Potter's hatred for the Defence teacher, it was likely to work just by dint of reverse psychology. Stupid boy.

As Minerva had suggested, he divided the students into groups of threes which normally would work in this class, because there were only eighteen students. Unfortunately, a particularly hypochondriacal Slytherin had reported to the infirmary after fainting in Ancient Runes. She was convinced she was going to get febrile magical distemper because she had been only twenty feet from Professor McGonagall the previous morning. Severus scowled when he realised that putting them in pairs wouldn't help, either; there would still be a spare. With a smirk, he paired Pansy Parkinson with Hermione Granger. Parkinson was complete Doxie-droppings when it came to nonverbal spells; Hermione had accomplished one the very first class.

Severus turned to Hermione and said, barely loudly enough for the Slytherin girl to overhear, "Perhaps you can teach Miss Parkinson a thing or two, Miss Granger." He raised an eyebrow at her, the corner of his mouth turning up so briefly it could have been mistaken for a mere nervous twitch.

Hermione responded, "Yes, sir." She hoped she had interpreted him correctly. Apparently she had, since Snape did not correct her "teaching method," which consisted simply of jinxing Pansy nonverbally and unhelpfully telling her partner, when the jinx hit her, "Don't forget your shield, Pansy," or "Pansy, you were supposed to block me.

Watch my wand!"

Pansy finally resorted to whispering the *Protego*, and Severus, who had been watching the two, said to her, "Parkinson, nonverbal. 'Nonverbal' means you do not speak. No words. In your head only."

Pansy opened her mouth then closed it. Snape had seemed fine when she had seen him in the library the previous day, but he was still clearly irritated with her. She didn't want to annoy him any further. So she spent the next twenty minutes being hit by a wide variety of jinxes and minor hexes, all of which Hermione cancelled not with any alacrity to the point where other groups stopped to gawk and giggle at particularly amusing results. Severus merely gazed on, not even bothering to tell the others to get back to their own work.

For the last twenty minutes of the class, Severus asked them to write a description of their experience and what they learned from it. He sat behind his desk and watched the students, not seeing them, envisioning only the lovely face of his beloved and remembering her kiss. For a moment, Severus wondered what the kiss had meant. He was sure that, although Minerva didn't loathe him, it certainly didn't mean that her feelings toward him were changing at all. Perhaps she pitied him. He certainly was pathetic. Somehow, that thought did not disturb him as it usually would. She was a goddess, filled with kindness and generosity. He would gratefully and humbly accept whatever crumbs she might wish to cast in his direction.

His eyes becoming more unfocussed, Severus recalled the sensation of her lips on his own, first so lightly, the merest feather touch, then more firmly as her lips gently pulled on his own. He wondered about his response. He had rarely ever kissed anyone before until the spell hit him. Now he had kissed Minerva hundreds of times, though he had never dared kiss her mouth until she had kissed him. He almost had kissed her yesterday, Severus remembered, but she had turned her cheek to him. He had seen many kisses, of course, mostly between horny teenagers. He had no idea whether he was doing it correctly.

Minerva didn't seem to mind the small kisses he bestowed on her, and sometimes he felt so moved by the sheer wonder of her being that he could be nothing other than tender and gentle with her. Yet Severus also felt great passion for Minerva; the spell hadn't compelled him to act on it yet, but when she had kissed him and he had begun to return it, his desire for her had mounted. Severus wanted to return her kiss properly next time perhaps, if he dared, even to initiate one of his own but he wasn't sure how to do it. Minerva had been so kind to him, perhaps she would help him. Some part of him recognised how pathetic that thought was, but it didn't bother him as it normally would. Minerva was not repulsed by his pitiable self; she would surely only appreciate his desire to please her with his kisses. Besides, he thought the kiss had felt nicer before he began to return it . . . that surely must be a sign he was doing something wrong.

Severus sat and daydreamed about his beloved for the rest of the class period and was somewhat startled when the students began to gather their books and parchments and file forward to hand in their written work. Hermione Granger hung back, shooing Weasley and Potter away as they tried to express their sympathy about how unfair it was that she was being singled out. It hadn't even occurred to them that Hermione had had a great deal of fun repeatedly jinxing Pansy and that Snape had never intervened except to admonish the Slytherin not to whisper her incantations at the same time that other students were also whispering their spells. Idiots. Gryffindors were all idiots. Except for Minerva, of course. And Albus. Severus looked at Hermione, who was now heading toward the front of the classroom. Hmmpf. And perhaps Miss Granger.

The classroom door was ajar; no doubt the two dynamic dunderheads were waiting outside, straining to hear or using those Extendable Ears. Snape pointed at the door. Hermione turned and looked. She was puzzled only for a moment, then she raised her wand, closed the door, and cast an Imperturbable.

"Do you also know *Colloportus*, Miss Granger?"

Hermione turned back and cast one more spell.

"Professor, I am sorry about earlier "

"You are not responsible for the idiocy and rudeness of your House-mates, Miss Granger." He looked at her. Why had he wanted to see her? Oh, yes! His brilliant idea and she had given him the perfect opportunity to approach her about it. "Do you have any free time today I mean do you have any time when you are not expected to be in class?" he asked, remembering that the girl probably had a well-planned study timetable.

"Umm, yes. I have a free period now, and then there's lunch, of course. But Professor, how is Professor McGonagall? They aren't telling us anything except that she is stable." She looked troubled.

"She is fine, Miss Granger." Seeing that her expression hadn't changed, he repeated, "She is *fine*. Really. Think a moment, Miss Granger. She is fine."

"Oh. I don't understand, but I believe you, sir."

"Hmmpf. Good." Now, back to his plan. "Miss Granger, I am going to give you a pass so that you can go into Hogsmeade." Something else occurred to him a slight hitch in his plan. "Do you have any money, Miss Granger?"

"Umm, some. In my dormitory."

"I will repay you, then." He took out his quill and began writing a pass for Hermione. "I need you to go to Honeydukes and buy a box of chocolates. Nice ones. Ones that witches like. Witches of fine taste."

He handed her the pass. "Charm the bag to look like the ones the apothecary uses. Tell anyone who asks that I sent you into town for potion ingredients as your punishment for . . . whatever. Oh, I will write you another pass for the Restricted Section. I will meet you there at eight o'clock. I will bring the money; you bring the chocolates." Suddenly realising that he had merely assumed her co-operation, he hesitated. "If you would, of course. I would appreciate it. I cannot go myself."

"Of course, Professor. I am happy to help you." Indeed, she did look happy to help him. "But I don't need a pass to the Restricted Section; I have one."

"Get two boxes, actually. One larger. That will be all, Miss Granger," he said, dismissing her automatically.

She returned to her desk to pick up her bag.

"And . . . thank you, as well, Miss Granger."

She turned a brilliant smile on him. "You're welcome, Professor!"

"Your personal honour guard is likely waiting outside. You should probably look dejected. Oh five points to Gryffindor for excellent and imaginative spell use in class this morning. Your *Confundus* was particularly well done . . . Do not tell anyone, or I will have to remove twice as many in order to maintain my reputation!" He actually quirked a slight smile.

"Yes, Professor." Hermione's smile became brighter, if that was possible, before she put the appropriate unhappy expression on her face and prepared to meet her friends.

The rest of the day proceeded as planned. Severus made an appearance at lunch; Albus kept company with Minerva and ate his lunch with her in the secret suite. Severus met Minerva before each class, recharging before he had to make another public appearance. With each passing hour, however, Severus noticed that his ability to concentrate on the students and to maintain his normal nasty demeanor was diminishing. Worried, he met with Albus in the Headmaster's office before dinner.

"I don't think I will be any good at all tomorrow, Albus. It's not a matter of making it through an hour or so without seeing Minerva; it's a matter of making it through without behaving so peculiarly that everyone notices. I can't concentrate, it's hard to remember to be short-tempered and nasty, and students speak to me but I can barely comprehend what they're saying half the time. I have even found myself on the verge of smiling at them, Albus."

Albus chuckled, then grew serious. "You don't think you will make it through the day tomorrow, then?"

"No, sir. I am sorry. I know you have made plans "

"Plans must be flexible, Severus. I will simply make the announcement this evening. I will tell the students and staff at dinner that you will be leaving immediately for Mongolia."

"Not tonight, Albus." Albus looked at him, puzzlement written on his face. Severus explained, "I have something I need to do in the library tonight. I can't pretend to leave until after that."

"Oh! All right, then. I *will* contact Remus tonight, though. He should be able to arrive tomorrow morning . . . Are you still certain that you want him to take your classes, Severus?"

"Yes. Honestly. More than I was, in fact. Minerva helped me to understand my reaction to him. I still don't like him, but as long as he poses no danger to the students, he is a competent teacher, and I have no objections to him taking my classes."

Albus looked pleased. "I will tell him that, Severus. He was concerned you would be put out by my asking him to step in for you."

"Hmmpf. He will definitely know I am not in my right mind, then."

Albus chuckled. "He will be pleased. I will make the announcement to the school during breakfast, then, and you can either come to breakfast or not, depending on how well you are feeling, all right, my boy?"

"Fine. Thank you, Albus."

"I stopped in and saw Minerva a few times while you were teaching today, Severus. She told me that you still hadn't spoken about the incident this morning. We need to do that."

"I'd really rather not, Headmaster."

"We have to. If not you and I, then you and Minerva. But you need to talk to one of us about what happened. And I have some other matters I wish to discuss with you, as well. Meet me here after dinner after you have visited Minerva."

"Very well, Headmaster." Severus nodded stiffly, with almost the same degree of reticence and resentment that he normally showed. "But I must be in the library by eight o'clock."

Albus patted his arm. "I do not mean this to be a scolding, Severus, although I am serious. And if you can be here by seven o'clock, I believe you will be able to visit Minerva again and be in the library by eight." He hesitated. "Why are you going to the library, if I may ask?"

"I am meeting a student, Headmaster."

"Mm. I see. Well, come along. You need to eat something before you return to see Minerva."

After dinner, Severus returned to the suite via Floo in his rooms, stopping there briefly to grab a small moneybag from his dresser drawer. He stepped through the fireplace into his new bedroom and looked around for his poetry book. He would use poetry now to press his case with Minerva. Severus quickly found the slim volume. Over the last two days, he had practically memorised this poem, but he could not rely on his memory entirely.

Walking into the sitting room, he couldn't help but smile when he saw Minerva stretched out, shoes off, feet up, reading *Transfiguration Today* and eating an apple.

"Good-evening, Minerva," he said softly.

She smiled at him. "Hello, Severus. How was dinner?"

"Quieter than usual. I think the students were remembering yesterday evening's meal and your very dramatic collapse. Which reminds me. I did not have the opportunity during my visits with you today to mention that I promised Messieurs Weasley and Potter that, once you were well, you would be dealing with their punishment."

"For what?"

Severus recounted the incident, omitting mention of Hermione. "I know it may not seem like much to you, Minerva, but they do and say these kinds of things all of the time. *In* my presence and well within earshot of other students. It is bad enough to know what they must say about me out of my presence, but I cannot allow them to consistently disrespect me like that right within my hearing. They would never behave that way with any other teacher. I wish they would just grow up and leave me alone." A look of pain crossed his face. "Why can't they just leave me alone?"

"Come sit next to me, Severus. I will speak to them. You are right. They should not disrespect you to your face or with you in the room. One cannot control how the students speak about staff when they are on their own, but you are right that they must learn to control their tongues and their behaviour and give every teacher at least the minimum respect due them by virtue of their position. I *would* make an exception in certain cases, of course." At Severus's expression, Minerva grinned. "We could call it the 'Umbridge Exception,'" referring to the previous year's Defence "teacher."

"Thank you, Minerva. It's really probably unnecessary in my case, however . . . I won't be teaching again after today. I spoke with Albus. He's contacting Remus this evening."

"I see . . . but after this is over, you still need to command respect in your classroom, Severus."

"After this is over? You still speak as if we will find a counter-curse." Severus sighed and lowered his head, allowing his hair to fall around his face. He turned back to her. "I have something I wish to read you, Minerva. I know most of it by heart, but not all of it. It is the rest of the poem I read you yesterday."

"All right. That sounds nice. Keats, didn't you say?"

"Yes. It's rather ironic, actually. It turns out that he wrote the poem in honour of a woman for his brother George to give to her, although at the time, the poet harboured feelings for the same woman; she eventually married George and not him. It seems an appropriate poem for me to read you for so many reasons." He took Minerva's hand and kissed it softly before opening the book to the correct page.

"Hadst thou liv'd when chivalry

"Lifted up her lance on high,

"Tell me what thou wouldst have been?"

"Ah! I see the silver sheen

"Of thy brodered, floating vest

"Cov'ring half thine ivory breast;

"Which, O heavens! I should see,

"But that cruel destiny

"Has placed a golden cuirass there;

"Keeping secret what is fair."

Severus's voice, dark and low, recited the poetry to such effect that Minerva was transfixed, more so than yesterday, when she had been so distracted by other concerns and the presence of Albus sitting across from them. He continued on, his dark voice smooth and resonant.

"See with what a stately pace

"Comes thine alabaster steed;

"Servant of heroic deed!

"O'er his loins, his trappings glow

"Like the northern lights on snow.

"Mount his back! thy sword unsheath!

"Sign of the enchanter's death;

"Bane of every wicked spell;

"Silencer of dragon's yell.

"Alas! thou this wilt never do:

"Thou art an enchantress too,

"And wilt surely never spill

"Blood of those whose eyes can kill."

He slowly closed the book and placed it on the low table in front of them. Severus turned to Minerva. *Sign of the enchanter's death; / Bane of every wicked spell; / Silencer of dragon's yell. / Alas thou this wilt never do: / Thou art an enchantress too, / And wilt surely never spill / Blood of those whose eyes can kill,* he repeated in a near whisper. "Will you not allow me to die, Minerva? Give this enchanter his death, please. If not tonight, then tomorrow or the next day? Before the imperative begins to will me to expressions of affection far more intrusive than those you have experienced already? For when that occurs, you will see me begin to go mad. You know from the texts we have studied what that will eventually mean. I know that you are too kind to allow me to suffer long, but I would prefer to end it while I still have some shred of dignity left and can still look upon your face and smile before I die, as I did last night before I slept." Tears had gathered in his eyes as he spoke, and he caressed her face tenderly, unaware he was doing so.

Minerva swallowed. "Severus. I tell you, you will not die. And you will not go mad. I know that Albus wants to speak to you soon, so you must go now, but we will discuss this more when you return, all right?"

Severus nodded sorrowfully. Minerva took his face in her hands. "I promise you, all will be well. We will talk tonight." And for a second time, she kissed him, gently placing her lips on his, eyes half-closed, pulling him nearer to her, and kissing him again. Severus's arms went around her as he accepted her kisses, allowing his lips to soften and gently respond to hers. When she drew back slightly, he looked at her, examining her face as if to read her wish, then he tentatively placed a light kiss on her lips and then another, before she stopped him with a gentle press of her hand.

"You need to go now, Severus."

He nodded and headed to the fireplace and the Headmaster's office.

"Good-evening, Severus!" the Headmaster greeted Severus as he stepped from the Floo. "I imagine that you did not eat much dinner, so I asked Wilsby to bring sandwiches and butterbeer. I didn't think you should have anything stronger than that if you are going to the library."

"Thank you, but I am not hungry. You wished to speak to me." Severus sat in the chair across from the Headmaster's desk.

"I wanted to *discuss* some things with you, Severus. I do not wish to lecture you. Although . . . I do wish you would eat something. I know it has been a concern of Minerva's. There's roast beef with horseradish, and a couple with tuna salad with capers, onions, and pickles. Two of your favourites."

Severus sighed and picked up a half a tuna sandwich. He attempted to glare at Albus as he took his first bite, but his glare looked as much like a pout as his scowl did, and Albus only smiled at him.

"Good! Well, let's start with this morning. I do have something to say that might sound like a lecture, but I want you to respond to it after you have finished eating, of course! I hope you enjoy the sandwiches. Minerva will be pleased.

"Both Minerva and I were distressed by the possibility of what may have transpired had I not woken up when I did. We are both very sorry that we did not secure the potion last night. We did not mean to place such a temptation in your path, my boy. We both care for you deeply and would have been terribly grieved if you had harmed yourself so needlessly."

Severus had eaten his half sandwich in a few bites and listened to Albus's words. After Albus finished speaking, Severus sat, silent and apparently transfixed by the sandwich platter.

After waiting for a response from the younger wizard, Albus finally said, "Severus, I do have other topics to discuss with you. I could move on to them, but I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on this subject first."

"I don't believe I have anything to say, sir. I will try to . . . abide by Minerva's wishes for as long as possible." He cleared his throat and looked up at the older wizard. "If she wishes me to live until the spell removes the choice from my hands, then I will do so. I hope that when that time arrives, you will have mercy on me and do what needs to be done. It may be cowardly of me, but I do not wish to suffer the fate of some of the wizards of whom I read."

"You will not, Severus . . . Minerva must not have spoken with you, then. Hmm. I think in that case, I will leave the rest of our discussion for a later time, when it will make more sense to you. Why don't you go on back to Minerva now, then make your trip to the library who are you seeing, Severus? If I may ask!"

Severus stiffened. "Hermione Granger. She . . . assisted me today."

"I see . . . do be careful what you say to her, my boy."

"I . . . I did already hint to her that her Head of House was not ill. I am sorry, Albus. She was worried, and I thought it would be all right since she knows of my condition already, as it is."

"That wasn't what I meant, Severus. I simply meant that you should be wary of what you say in a public place such as the library could anyone have overheard what you said to her earlier?"

"No, sir. Miss Granger placed both an Imperturbable and a *Colloportus* on the door."

"Oh, that's fine, then. I am sure she is a young lady of great discretion. Most trustworthy."

Suddenly the potential idiocy of what he had done that day struck him. "Oh, Albus, I do hope she is!" He stood and began to pace.

"What is it, my boy? Did you tell her something more than that Minerva wasn't genuinely ill?"

"No, no, it's what I asked of her. I'm such a fool. I was thinking only of one thing." He turned to Albus. "It is a very good thing I am not going to teach tomorrow. I would be a danger to everyone."

"Why, Severus? What did you ask her?"

"Just to do me a favour. Do something that I couldn't do myself. It was idiotic. Completely foolish. I got an idea into my head and didn't think of anything else. It was just . . . just stupid." He plopped into a chair.

"I am sure that whatever it was you asked her to do, you can trust in her discretion, Severus. She has proven herself trustworthy so far. And I am aware of several secrets she has kept for very long stretches. I believe she will be able to keep yours indefinitely."

"I gave her five points, Albus. And I thanked her." He looked up at Albus, searching his face for approval. "Even after she learned what she did yesterday, she defended me to the dunderheaded duo that traipse about after her, then she was very co-operative in class." Severus smiled slightly at the memory of Pansy Parkinson doing a jig whilst singing "God Save the Queen." Very inventive, that one. Not particularly *fair*, combining two jinxes, but funny. Hermione had a bit of a nasty streak hidden within that Gryffindor heart. Look at what she'd done to Umbridge, after all. But Hermione seemed to reserve her nastiness to those who had brought it on themselves somehow; to her friends, she showed the utmost loyalty. Severus hoped that he was not on her wrong side. He *was* nasty, after all. And he *did* bring his troubles on himself most of the time, as Minerva so correctly pointed out. Minerva! Truly a goddess of wisdom!

"Well, I doubt you have anything to worry about, Severus. She knows that it is not just you involved in this situation. And I believe Miss Granger does hold you in rather high regard despite your less-than-kind attitude toward her and her friends."

"She surely cannot expect me, as your spy, to be all chummy with her and her hangers-on. I thought she had more intelligence than that. Wouldn't expect it from the others, of course."

"No, and I believe that as she has come to understand your role in the Order better, she understands that and doesn't expect you to be *blind* it's rather that . . ." Albus hesitated. "I ought not say this to you in your current state."

"You can't say that, Albus. It's unfair. You should either have said nothing or just said what you wanted to. What is it?"

"It's your petty meanness that she cannot understand. The gratuitous exercise of many tiny cruelties, not merely to maintain an image for yourself, but to provide yourself with some amusement. As you did on Friday, much to your own detriment."

Severus looked chagrined a moment, but then said sharply, "I suppose she would prefer that I use a blood-letting quill to have my students write lines a practice that went on all of last year, from what I understand."

"I did not know of it, Severus," Albus answered quietly.

"No? You *should* have. And how is it that every tiny harsh remark I make to some over-sensitive Hufflepuff or Gryffindor makes it to the ears of their Heads of House *and* to your own but no one said anything to anyone about Umbridge's on-going sadistic cruelty and abuse that caused physical injury to the students? The students hate me more than they did her, and I have never done anything to any of them that would come near to what she did. Not to mention that I am, at the very least, *competent*." Tears rose in Severus's eyes and some of his normal bitterness seeped into his voice as he thought of how reviled he always had been and always would be.

"They did not mount a campaign to rid the school of *you* while I was absent last spring, Severus; it was she against whom all of the mischief was directed. From what I understand, there was rather a plague of peculiar illnesses amongst her students, sometimes resulting in an entire class being in the infirmary rather than her classroom. You may have the occasional malingeringer in your class, Severus, but not only do the students realise that you would catch them in their game, but also that you are a competent teacher. Even those who would never admit it out loud know that subconsciously."

"Really? Then why am I always told how abysmal my teaching methods are?"

"Because you *could* be outstanding, not merely competent. But it is now coming up on seven-forty. You need to return to Minerva if you are meeting Miss Granger at eight. Tell Minerva, if you please, that I will be in my office until at least ten tonight, perhaps later. I have a lot of work to catch up on."

Severus nodded. "I will try to remember. If I do not, it will be unintentional. I find that my mind wanders when I am not with Minerva, and when *am* with her, I am quite focussed on her."

"I understand, my boy. She probably won't expect me for a while, anyway. Here, bring the sandwiches with you." Albus waved his wand and the sandwiches packed themselves up, neatly bundled into the red-checked cloth they had rested on. "Minerva might like some of the fish. She's never been particularly fond of roast beef. Though she does love Yorkshire pudding."

Severus gathered up the sandwiches and Flooed back to the suite to see Minerva. It hadn't been very long since he had last seen her, and the imperative wasn't yet overwhelming, but he didn't know how long he would be away from her next. He hoped Granger would be on time for their meeting.

Minerva wasn't in the sitting room when Severus returned, so dropping the bundle of sandwiches on the coffee table, he crossed and knocked on her closed bedroom door.

"Just a minute!" came the reply.

Minerva opened the door and smiled at Severus. "Since I'm not going anywhere or seeing anyone but you and Albus, I thought I'd get ready for bed early tonight." She was

wearing a long tartan dressing gown over a nightgown. Her hair was up in a loose bun.

"That's fine. I need to leave again in a few minutes, my love. I am sorry to abandon you, but I will not be long."

Minerva refrained from saying that he would have to return within an hour or so. "That's fine. I'm actually feeling as though this is a bit of a vacation. Particularly once Albus told me he was only going to teach three of the classes, I stopped feeling quite so guilty." She walked into the sitting room, Severus following her.

"You felt guilty?" Severus asked, puzzled.

"Very. Albus already has more to do than any one wizard should attempt. And that was before all of this happened. Knowing that he was worrying about me was hard enough, but then when he said that I was going to need to be absent from the school for several days, I knew that meant even more work for him. Particularly since I am limited in what assistance I can give him while I'm cooped up here." Minerva sat down on one end of the couch and patted the cushion next to her, inviting Severus to sit. "I feel better about it now, though. Albus said he will put off one of his trips until next week so that he can be here with me with us and that means that he will at least have a little more time to take care of other school business, most of which I help him with."

"I am sorry, Minerva. You should never have felt guilty. This is all my fault. And I am sorry for the trouble I am causing Albus, as well."

"I know. But we've discussed this before. You know how this came about. I don't think it's useful to dwell on the specific event anymore just to place blame. What's done is done. It can't be changed. We take what we find and we move on. Full stop."

"I was thinking only a few minutes ago that you are as wise as your namesake, Minerva." He shyly caressed her face before leaning forward to kiss her, hoping she would not turn her cheek to him. When, to his delight, she did not, Severus kissed her very softly and meekly on her lips. He kissed her again and became nervous. Now what should he do? He sat back and looked down at her face, which, to him, was the most beautiful he had ever seen. He ran his finger across her lips. "Minerva, I hope you will not think me foolish," he said softly, "but I do not know how to kiss you. Obviously, I have. But I think . . . I think that I could please you, if you would let me, but I do not know how."

"I see. It's all right, Severus. We all have different experiences and expectations. I rather liked the last kisses you gave me. Um, if you were to kiss me as you have been kissing me the last few days those tender, sweet kisses that would be a good start. We can move on from there. How does that sound?"

Severus nodded. He had been gazing at her lips as she spoke, as if he were enthralled. He bent toward her once more and kissed her, a mere graze of lip on lip, then he repeated the same movement, first on both lips, then just her lower lip. He then gently moved his lips against hers, relishing the feel of their softness. As he continued to kiss her, Minerva responded, allowing her lips to move with his, then returning his kisses. Enraptured, Severus began to kiss her throat again, pushing her dressing gown aside as he sought her creamy skin. His fingers moved on ahead of his mouth as he made his way down toward her right breast; when they encountered her nightgown, they pushed that lower, then moved back to her shoulder and eased her loose gown down her arm. Severus moaned as his lips moved further along her breast, his hazy brain only dimly aware that her nipple was close by. His hand moved again, slipping tentatively beneath the thin material of her gown and finding her breast, firm yet soft beneath his fingers.

Minerva allowed his exploration, watching through half-open eyes as he kissed and touched her chest and her right breast. When he slipped her gown from her shoulder then reached beneath it to touch her breast so carefully, a slight thrill went through her, whether from his touch or from the intensity of his concentration, she was not sure, but before he could uncover her breast more fully, Minerva gently redirected his attention to her neck and removed his fingers from their exploration. He kissed her neck a few times more, and Minerva felt another rush of pleasure as his warm breath and soft lips found one of her sensitive spots.

"Here, Severus," she said, pushing him up and away from her. "Kiss me once more, then you must gather yourself together. It is time for you to leave."

He looked at Minerva with a dazed expression, but rather than kiss her, he sat back. "You should not allow me such liberties, Minerva. I have said I cannot help myself."

"I hope this is not going to lead you to say that I must loathe your touch. We have had our final conversation on that point, and I will hear nothing of it again," she said firmly.

"No, no, I just wish to preserve your dignity, my love. Whether you loathe my touch or not, having me drooling and breathing all over you like that . . . it can't be pleasant."

"You might be surprised, Severus. And you have not drooled on me yet. I will assuredly tell you if you begin to do so. Now you must leave. I will be here when you return obviously and we will have a very serious discussion. In the meantime, I would like you to consider, if you are able, what it is I might mean when I tell you repeatedly that I will not allow you to die." Minerva gave the befuddled wizard a gentle push. "Go on. You said you had to be somewhere. You should be good for at least an hour and a half with what you er, we just did."

Severus stood and went to his bedroom. His mind cleared some as he approached the fireplace in the corner of the room. Hermione Granger in the library. Chocolates. Money. He patted his robes. Yes, his moneybag was safely stowed in his trouser pocket. To his office first, then the library to find the girl and the chocolates.

Severus approached the Restricted Section and became alarmed. There were several students there. How could he and Granger make the exchange right in front of them?

Suddenly, Hermione was at his side. "Professor Snape! I am sorry I am late for detention in your office, sir. I lost track of time." Somehow she managed to lead him from the library whilst making it look as though she was the one being hustled along.

Outside the library, she looked around, then she said in a low voice, "Professor Slughorn gave us an assignment that requires us to do research in the Restricted Section. I did not know until this afternoon."

Severus was about to respond, when two figures came toward them. Two unpleasantly familiar figures.

"Hermione!" Harry greeted her. "I thought we were meeting in the Restricted Section later." He cast a poisonous glance at Snape.

"Yes, *later*. 'Later' does not mean 'now,' Harry. I have detention."

"Oh. What?" Harry and Ron both looked confused. "You didn't mention it earlier."

"I forgot."

"*You* forgot?" Ron's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "You never forget anything like that."

"Well, she did. I had to fetch her. And as enjoyable as it is to listen to your most scintillating conversation, Miss Granger is already tardy. I doubt she will be returning to do your work for you tonight."

Severus turned and began to walk away down the hall, expecting Hermione to follow him. Then he heard Potter, not even bothering to whisper this time, "Don't let that git keep you in detention all night, Hermione. We'll wait up for you."

Severus froze. He felt as though all of the warmth drained from his body, all of those positive feelings he had gathered to himself through Minerva's kisses simply washed away. Potter. Always Potter. And Potter was right. He *was* just a git.

Severus was rigid, unable to move forward, unable to turn and spit the venom he usually had in such plentiful supply. Hermione said nothing. She did not defend him as she had earlier. His face began to crumple. Why couldn't they all just leave him alone? Then he felt an odd sensation. A ripply tingle of magic. He felt a bit better. Not exactly happy, but he didn't feel as though he was going to collapse in tears because some little shite had called him a name.

Then Hermione was in front of him, walking slightly ahead of him. "Sorry my friends detained me, Professor. I will make up the time, I promise."

Severus began to walk along behind her. "I will make certain of it, Miss Granger." She glanced back at him and winked. Good heavens. The girl had winked at him. Well, he supposed they were co-conspirators.

"Get a move on, Miss Granger; we haven't all night!" He picked up his pace, feeling marginally better.

They reached his office, Severus whispered the password and opened the door, then Hermione immediately closed it and cast an Imperturbable and *aColloportus*. She turned to him. "I'm sorry about casting the Cheering Charm on you without your permission, sir."

"Is that what that was?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid it wasn't very good. I'm better at nonverbal jinxes than Cheering Charms. Did it help, though?"

"Yes. It did. I don't know how you knew . . . you were behind me."

"Your shoulders, sir."

"My shoulders?"

"Yes. They slumped just a bit, and then you froze and didn't move or do anything. I didn't read very much about that spell that Pansy cast, but I understand that it can make a person . . . I'm sorry to use this word, sir, but it can make a person somewhat more vulnerable than usual. And of course I noticed today in class that you weren't yourself. In addition to giving me points and making your request, that is and I have the chocolates here for you!"

Severus was alarmed. "Do you think anyone else noticed? How was I different?"

"You were quieter. You didn't take any points you didn't give any, either, except the five to me," she answered, blushing. "But I don't think anyone else noticed. They were too amused by Pansy's ineffective use of the *Protego*. I'm sure everyone still thinks you are a nasty bastard, sir."

"Oh. Good. I guess." Irony: he almost falls apart because Potter calls him a git, but then he's happy that everyone believes him to be a nasty bastard.

"Except me, sir. Well. Not exactly."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Well, I don't think you're *only* a nasty bastard, sir. That's just one side of you; that's all I meant."

"Hmmpf. Well." Severus gazed into space.

"Umm, sir? The chocolates?" She pulled two heart-shaped boxes from the large brown paper bag she was carrying, one very large one and one slightly smaller, then she pulled out a small package wrapped in brown paper. "I also bought some boomslang skin." She blushed. "I thought it would be good if I actually went to the apothecary, just in case I got stopped on the way back and someone wondered why I didn't have any potion ingredients. Besides, um, I owe you some. From second year."

"Second year?"

"Yes, sir. I needed some for a potion. It was a difficult ingredient to obtain."

Severus blinked at her. "What potion was that, Miss Granger? Even in my current state I can think of no second-year potion that requires boomslang skin."

She muttered something in response.

"You will need to speak up."

"Polyjuice Potion."

"Ah, yes, the first time you ended up in the infirmary that year. I wasn't sure what you had done to yourself."

"The potion was fine. It worked very well on the two other subjects. I simply added the wrong final ingredient."

Severus's lips twitched. "You mistook cat hair for human hair?"

Hermione turned red and nodded.

"Hmmpf. Well, I do not teach Potions any longer. I have sufficient personal supply of boomslang skin. I suggest you keep it or give it to Professor Slughorn, if your conscience requires it."

Hermione stuffed the package into her book bag. "I hope the chocolates are all right, sir. I tried to stay away from any iffy flavours. And I did make an addition, I hope you don't mind."

"What was that?"

"Well, they had some nice candied ginger, and I know that Professor McGonagall enjoys ginger newts, so I thought she might like it. The chocolates are all in the middle of the boxes and the candied ginger makes a nice border around it . . . I thought."

Severus took the lid from one of the boxes. It did make a nice border. "That was very thoughtful of you, Miss Granger." Tears sprang to his eyes.

"It's okay, sir. I'm sure you would have preferred to pick them out yourself, so I just did the best I could. Um, do you need another Cheering Charm, sir?" she asked quietly.

"No, no. I am quite cheered. This is Severus Snape, cheered." He tried to laugh.

"Oh! Okay, then." Hermione blinked at him, somewhat bemused. "I suppose I need to stay a while so it looks as though I actually had detention."

"Yes, right. Detention." Severus took a deep breath. "Tell them I had you write lines. I'm sure you can think of something appropriate and git-like. I, however, cannot stay much longer, Miss Granger. Please feel free to use the desk. Shut the door behind you and the wards will automatically reset." Albus had altered his wards for him because he no longer had the ability to control them. They were all based on a single password. Quite insecure, but practical for the moment.

"That's fine, sir. I will leave just before curfew, then."

"Good. Oh, how much do I owe you for the chocolates?"

"Three galleons and eight sickles."

Severus pulled his moneybag from his trouser pocket and counted out the galleons and sickles.

"And for the boomslang skin?"

"But you aren't keeping it, sir."

"I had not heard that you were independently wealthy, Miss Granger, unless you have discovered a money tree somewhere. You would not have purchased the boomslang skin if I had not sent you on my errand. How much was it?"

"One galleon fourteen sickles, sir. I will give it to Professor Slughorn."

"I don't particularly care what you do with it, Hermione as long as you stay out of trouble," he added, remembering Minerva's admonishment about the students being under his care. He shoved the money across the desk toward her.

"Okay, thanks!" Hermione smiled.

He picked up the large box of chocolates and walked toward the Floo. "I really must go now." He was beginning to feel the uneasiness that preceded the anxiety and trembling that eventually led to him collapsing in a twitching, incoherent heap.

"Sir your chocolates." She held out the other, marginally smaller, box.

"I hope you like candied ginger, Hermione." When she looked at him blankly, he said, "Even I recognise that one does not usually have the recipient of a gift purchase it herself, but it's the best I could do. It's for your help. A thank-you."

"Oh! For me? Really?"

"Yes. I hope you enjoy them. Good-night." He took a pinch of Floo-Powder from the mantle. "Miss Granger, you will forget this conversation, but, most especially, you will forget the password I am about to use."

"I assume you don't mean that literally, sir."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Of course not. Every now and then, Miss Granger, I begin to wonder whether I am wrong about you." Hermione just stared at him. "I begin to think that perhaps I am wrong that you aren't as big a dunderhead as I usually have to teach." He tossed the Floo-Powder into the small flame Albus had set to burn there earlier that day, and he called out clearly, "*Credo et exspecto!*" and Flooed back to his beloved Minerva, his large, heart-shaped box of chocolates and candied ginger clutched to his chest.

Nine: Lessons in Love

Chapter 9 of 16

Severus continues to act in response to the spell. He and Minerva have an important conversation, and his gestures of affection intensify.

Written in response to Potter Place Winter 2007 Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Nine: Lessons in Love

Minerva paced. She should have spoken to Severus about her decision already. She had thought they would be able to discuss it that morning before they left for his office, but with one thing and another, trying to ready him to face repeated periods apart from him and preparing him to teach Defence classes without being able to use his wand, there just hadn't been the time. Then the breaks between his classes were just long enough to recharge him to make it through the next class hour. She probably should have eaten lunch with him, rather than with Albus, but she cherished her time with Albus and had selfishly not wanted to give that up in order to tell Severus that she would have sex with him.

She sighed. It was true that the *Adfectus* affected Severus's cognitive abilities, but Minerva thought that he would finally have tweaked to the notion that she was going to help him fulfill the spell's imperative, particularly after she had kissed him. But Severus was right: one of the few bare emotions left to him by the *Adfectus* was his own self-loathing, and that seemed to interfere with his ability to reason just as much as the *Adfectus* did and it had a head-start of many years over the spell. So very many of his everyday reactions seemed to arise out of that self-loathing. Minerva did not doubt that Severus took great pride in his potions abilities and his strengths in defensive magic, but that pride had taken on a disproportionate importance in his life since he felt so unworthy in other areas.

Having "the Talk" with Severus was bound to be uncomfortable. Minerva had thought she might have Albus do it, but at this point, she realised that it would be inappropriate for all three of them if Albus were to tell Severus. Albus could speak to him afterwards, if he wished, but she needed to be the one to broach the subject initially.

Poor Albus! This must be so hard on him. It wasn't as though this was occurring toward the beginning of their relationship when he had had so much difficulty believing that she truly wanted to be with him, but it still couldn't be easy for him. At the start of their relationship, Minerva had found it astonishing that a wizard of Albus's accomplishments and obvious strengths, talents, and personal charisma could actually find it hard to believe that a witch would want him and want to be with him forever. At least Albus wasn't emotionally damaged in the way that Severus so clearly was . . .

Minerva had no illusions that giving Severus love and affection over the next days would somehow cure him of all of his psychological and emotional problems, but she did hope that this curse could actually have a bright side for him in the end. Perhaps he might adjust his view of himself a little maybe even consider the possibility of a real relationship with some nice young witch after he was no longer bound by Voldemort's existence. If Severus loved *her*, he could surely love another woman someday. And

even if he never were to find another witch to love, perhaps he might be able to develop closer, more fulfilling friendships. Minerva tried to think of whom Severus might consider a friend. She would have to try to be a better friend to him after all this was over. Of course, she was being a good friend to him now! There was Albus, as well, but their relationship was so mixed with Severus's guilt, resentment, and sense of debt. And Albus's own sense that he had failed Severus when he was a student. That their relationship was not an easy one. It was clear that Severus cared deeply for Albus. So deeply that Severus had thought of him when he had decided to down a bottle of sleeping potion that morning. Thank goodness they had woken up before he had managed to leave the room with the potion!

Severus probably still considered some of the Death Eaters to be friends of a sort. Wizards such as Lucius Malfoy. He spent time with them, ate with them, and they had known him a long time. But how close could he be to people whose actions, presumably, he abhorred, and more to the point, whom he was betraying on a daily basis? He might have some emotional connection to them still, but she doubted they could qualify as friends.

Running through the list of Hogwarts staff in her mind, Minerva tried to find some with whom Severus might be friends. There were ones he seemed to tolerate better than others, but she couldn't think of any who seemed to be friends with him. He and Sprout discussed the uses of plants in potions in a collegial way, but they couldn't be considered friends. Flitwick. They were cordial. Filius admired Severus's devotion to Albus. But she didn't believe they were friends.

There was Slughorn. Slughorn had been Severus's teacher. As had she, of course. But he had not taught beside him until this year and still saw him through the eyes of a former teacher and Head of House; Severus also hadn't much cared for the way that Slughorn had acted when he was Head of Slytherin, but Minerva couldn't see that his own methods were much of an improvement. Of course, he was hampered because of his double role. As Minerva went through the names of the staff, she realised that the only one who came close to showing him affection and respect was Hagrid, oddly enough.

If Severus were asked who on the staff he was friends with, he would probably snort and say something caustic about the stupidity of the question rather than admit that he had no friends at the place he had taught for so many years.

Minerva felt tears rise in her eyes, and when she blinked, they trickled down her cheeks. After this was over, would he even allow her the bit of friendship she had offered him before, or would he, Snape-like, turn on her in some self-defeating attempt to protect himself? She couldn't worry about that now. She could only do her best and show him as much affection and care as she could over the next few days.

How to tell Severus that there was no third option and that she would have sex with him? Minerva certainly wasn't ready to actually do the deed that very night. She would like to have this proceed as normally as possible under the bizarre circumstances. Minerva was actually thankful that he wouldn't be teaching tomorrow. They could spend the day becoming more familiar with each other, more comfortable. There was little doubt in her mind that, despite the spell and the rapture that seemed to come over him at times when he acted on the imperative, Severus himself was not entirely comfortable with her yet. She would give him another massage tonight, Minerva decided, with all of the lamps and the candles lit, if he would allow her.

That still brought her back to how to approach the subject. He would be returning in a little while. Minerva would just have to find a way. Perhaps the right words would come to her once he arrived. If only Albus were here, she could ask his advice. Although that might be unfair to Albus. He was so concerned for her well-being. And for Severus's. That he had been pushing his own discomfort aside, she was sure. Still, she needed to see him, both to reassure herself and to reassure him.

"Wilsy!"

The old house-elf popped to her side immediately. "Yes, Professor Dumbledore's Minerva?"

"I need to see Albus, but I can't leave here. Could you go to him and tell him for me?"

"Yes, ma'am." The house-elf was gone as soon as she had spoken.

A few minutes later, the fireplace flared green and Albus stepped through. "Minerva! Is everything all right? Is it Severus?"

"No, no, everything is fine. I just needed to see you, that's all."

"Ah, I see that Severus forgot to mention that I would be back late tonight."

"He didn't say, no, but I would have called you anyway. I am sorry to interrupt your work, but Severus will be returning soon and I need to talk to him. I just don't know where to start. And once I have told him, I have no idea what his reaction will be or what I should do next. Not to mention that it will feel even more real once I've told him."

"I see. Why don't we sit together a while? I am afraid I have little advice to give you, however. I think that you will need to lead up to it, of course, not just blurt it out the moment he steps from the Floo."

Minerva curled up next to him and laid her head on his shoulder as he put his arm around her. "I don't know as I expected you to be able to tell me what to say or how to approach the subject. I just needed reassurance, I suppose, that I can do this. It is all so very odd, Albus."

"That it is, Minerva. But I am sure you can handle it gracefully."

"I hope so. I've been thinking a lot about Severus, as you may imagine. He must be a very lonely and isolated man. I suppose I've always known that about him, but this incident has brought it home to me. And he is so very . . . I don't want to say that he's emotionally *disturbed*, exactly; that isn't what I mean. And judging him under these conditions isn't particularly fair. But it seems that his emotional development has been stunted and twisted in ways that have hurt his ability to have relationships; his role as a spy has only made that worse. It may be naive of me, but I am hoping that some good can come out of this and Severus might learn something about the possibilities for a healthy relationship. I don't fool myself into believing that I can fix what is wrong with him; that would be the work of years for someone with far more skill, patience, and detachment than I have. But I *would* like him to carry away the notion that someday, when all of the business with Voldemort is over, he might be able to have a relationship with some young witch, one that isn't based on exploitation, cruelty, or the needs and expectations of others. And even if he doesn't or can't, perhaps he might still be able to form friendships in a way he is unable to now."

Albus squeezed her and kissed the top of her head. "That is a splendid way of looking at this, my dear. You are correct, though. Acting as a spy, ~~a~~double-spy, has only exacerbated the difficulties he would have had already. I don't think it is safe for him to have friends as most do, not yet. But we can be better friends to him. Perhaps he will feel comfortable in confiding in you as a friend. As you are aware, there are impediments to him being that at ease with me, although I have no doubt about his loyalty and devotion."

"Neither have I, Albus. And he cares for you very much, you know. I think he would do almost anything for you."

"Yes, and oddly enough, that is one of the things that is an impediment to our being closer than we are . . ." Albus sighed. "I do have quite a bit of work to do. Why don't I go work for a while longer, then I will try to be back by ten-thirty. If you need me sooner . . . if things don't go smoothly, just call Wilsy, and I will come."

"All right, Albus. I had thought I might try to give him another massage tonight. I only gave him a very brief one last night. By the way, you never told me about all of those scars. Are they from Voldemort?"

"Some are. Some are from the short time he spent in Azkaban waiting for me to convince the Wizengamot to release him. Some are from his childhood, both before and during his time at Hogwarts."

"What?"

"His Grandfather Prince was far from being *a*prince, I am afraid. Part of Severus's shame in himself comes from that man's early lessons. I do not know how many of his

scars actually come from injuries he received while he was here at Hogwarts, but he received several very long, deep claw marks from the incident in the Shrieking Shack, which have never completely faded. They are on his chest." Albus looked sorrowful, exhausted, and old as he mentioned the scars received during the encounter with Remus Lupin so many years before.

"Ah. I should have realised about those, at least." Minerva was silent. Albus had been second-guessing his decisions in that matter for years, never to any satisfactory conclusion. Minerva had always thought that, although he was correct in his decisions with regard to Sirius and Remus, he had erred in the way he had handled Severus. He should have done more to reassure him, to talk to him. Simply because he had very valid reasons for keeping both boys in school and not letting the truth about Remus's condition become widely known, that did not mean he could not have shown Severus more warmth and compassion. Severus had never particularly *invited* warmth and compassion; Minerva remembered the surly, reticent student very well. But he hadn't ever had much of an opportunity to experience it, either. That Albus later came to regret his handling of the affair brought her no joy, particularly as Albus believed it to be one of the factors that had driven Severus to join Voldemort. That boy had *never* been a joiner, and yet he had joined the Death Eaters under the control of a Dark Wizard who demanded absolute obedience and complete loyalty with only false promises of power given in return.

"All right, Albus. Why don't you return to your office now. I will have my private chat with Severus in his bedroom, so feel free to Floo back as soon as you are able. I hope you don't have to work too late."

"Well, the sooner I leave, the sooner I can return, my dear," he said, giving her a kiss. "Good luck with your conversation with Severus. I am sure you will find an appropriate way to broach the subject with him. Perhaps after that massage, hmm?"

"It really doesn't bother you that I am giving him a massage, Albus?" she said as they stood.

"Well, let's put it this way. If you were to give him an ordinary massage under ordinary circumstances because he needed one, it would not bother me. If you were to give him something *other* than an ordinary massage under ordinary circumstances simply because you both felt like it, I would very likely be quite bothered. However *whatever* you do under these extraordinary circumstances will not bother me, regardless of the reason for it. In fact, my dear, I think that you should remember the blanket permission I gave you a few days ago to do whatever *you* need to do in this situation, and not seek my permission for each individual activity you wish to engage in. Simply take me out of the equation, so to speak, make your own decisions, and know that, whatever you decide to do, it is all right with me. If, however, you feel the need to talk about anything, I am happy to listen."

"All right . . ." Minerva smiled at him as he rose from the sofa. "I will remember that: your permission is already given. It will make it easier for me, Albus, not needing to wonder what you might think of every individual activity."

"It will be easier for me, as well," Albus replied. "Simply because your engagement in these activities does not disturb me, this does not mean that I particularly wish to contemplate each one in detail. I hope you can distinguish between those two concepts, my dear, and see my statement neither as a symptom of heartlessness nor of disingenuousness."

"No, I do understand. But just as you said that I could talk to you if I need to, you can talk to me, as well, you know."

"I know. And I will, I am sure."

After Albus had left, Minerva settled back down on the couch with a book on spells that effect the mind and emotions, and waited for Severus. She didn't have to wait long before he arrived in a flurry of green sparks.

"Minerva, my love! I am sorry I have been away so long. I hope you haven't been lonely. I brought you something! A real present." Severus stepped toward her, practically skipping across the room in his joy at seeing her. He was holding out the largest heart-shaped Honeydukes boxes she had ever seen.

"Oh, my, Severus! I don't know what to say!" Be gracious, she thought, be gracious and appreciative. "I certainly never expected you to get me anything."

"I thought you would be surprised," he replied, delighted. "I hope you like them. I'm afraid that, conditions being what they are, I was unable to make the selections myself, but I did approve them!"

"I can't even begin to imagine how you managed this." She suddenly wondered if he had waylaid some student and confiscated them. "It's simply . . . astonishing."

Severus beamed. Minerva didn't think she'd ever seen him smile like that, neither as a student nor as an adult.

"Open them! There's something special in there for you," he urged.

Minerva took the heavy box from Severus and set it on the coffee table. Shaking the box slightly, she removed the lid. She smiled. Very unlikely that he had confiscated this from any student.

"Candied ginger! I do enjoy that, thank you, Severus."

"Are you going to try some? There are no iffy-centres, either. Just the good ones."

Minerva turned the lid of the box over and saw where the shop had charmed it to show pictures and descriptions of each chocolate contained in this particular box. They all sounded quite nice except for the mocha and the chocolate-covered espresso beans. Those sounded like something Severus would enjoy. Whoever procured these for Severus must be someone who knew them both. She was sure that it hadn't been Albus. The mystery deepened.

"Severus, I know you're not supposed to ask too many questions when someone gives you a present, but your ingenuity astounds me. How on earth did you get these chocolates?"

"I had help, obviously," Severus said, smiling with delight that his gift was not only appreciated, but that she thought him ingenious. "I really shouldn't tell my secrets, Minerva, but I will, for you. I met with Miss Granger this morning that is why I was a little bit late getting back from the sixth-year class. You see, I had this idea that I would like to get you chocolates, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get to Honeydukes and back in time. I had wished there was someone who might go for me. I thought of Miss Granger, but after yesterday, I didn't think she would go. I was still considering asking her anyway when she did something that helped me decide it couldn't hurt to ask."

"What was that, Severus?"

"Remember I told you what Potter and Weasley said outside the classroom? Miss Granger told them to stop she even said I was a hero. So I asked her if she would do me a favour, and this is the result! We did have some trouble with the exchange, but she was quite brilliant don't tell her I said that and we managed it. No thanks to the dundering dimwits who seem to believe she belongs to them, of course."

"Well, that was very kind of her, indeed, Severus! I hope you thanked her; I'm sure it took time out of her busy day to do that for you."

"Of course I did, Minerva! I surprised her with a box of chocolates, too not as big as this one, though . . . And she had to buy it herself . . . But ~~she~~ was surprised. It was fun." Severus grinned. His usual surprises for people were rather nasty ones, and he was himself surprised that it was so enjoyable to surprise someone with something pleasant. "And I gave her five points after class. Of course, I told her that if she said anything about them to anyone, I'd have to dock twice as many."

"Thank you, Severus. I'm very pleased with you." And she was. She knew he'd probably revert to his usual miserable self, but this certainly showed that he had potential to be more than that.

"So try one, Minerva."

"All right, but you must have one, as well."

"I don't eat many sweets, my love. But I will try one for you."

Minerva picked out a dark chocolate truffle with a creamy dark chocolate centre for herself and handed Severus a small cluster of chocolate-covered espresso beans.

"I normally wouldn't recommend those before bed, but you'll be taking the potion, so a few probably won't hurt you," she said.

She bit into the creamy smooth chocolate. Mmm. There was a reason that Honeydukes remained the premier wizarding confectioner. Minerva watched Severus as he bit into the treat she'd handed him. Several expressions crossed his face before one of satisfaction settled there.

"These are very good, Minerva. I always thought it was a peculiar idea and a waste of good coffee beans, but I like them."

"Here, try this one." She handed him a chocolate with a mocha centre.

"Oh, that's nice, too!"

"I'm glad. I would not have wanted to have to eat this whole box alone. It wouldn't be nearly as much fun." Minerva chewed on a piece of candied ginger. Severus hadn't started swooning on her or over her yet, but the joy of giving her a box of candy could only last so long, she was sure, even one as enormous as this.

Minerva had a small bottle of massage oil in her pocket. She had asked Wilsby to get it for her, which she did, but with many disapproving looks, saying, "Professor Dumbledore does not like cedar scent in oil or soap or shampoo or in anything on his body. He says it's better on the trees than on him."

"I know that, Wilsby," Minerva had replied taking the eucalyptus-and-cedar scented oil. It was the only nonfloral scent she could think of that she wouldn't use on Albus. "It's not for Albus."

Wilsby had looked even more disapproving at that. Really! Having to explain oneself to a house-elf! "You can ask Albus about it; it was his idea." Wilsby had just shaken her head and Disapparated.

"You know, Severus, I thought, if you'd like, of course, that I might give you a massage. I have some nice oil this time. It might help you sleep well again."

Severus stopped mid-chew and stared at her. Minerva could almost see the entire loathing-ugly-disgusting monologue go through in his head before he finally swallowed his chocolate and said, "I would like that, Minerva."

"All right, then. Why don't you go get ready for bed, just leave off your pyjama top, and I'll be along in a few minutes? I will knock before I come in."

Severus nodded. "I'm glad I brought my pyjamas," he blurted, then he blushed.

Minerva smiled. "Yes, that is convenient. Now go along."

Minerva didn't know how long it would take him to get ready for bed, but she gave him ten minutes before she knocked. He opened the door a minute later, and she saw that he must have taken a very quick shower, since he had a towel around his shoulders and was rubbing at his hair with a second one.

"Ready?" she asked brightly. He was probably more ready than she, Minerva thought. "Shall I dry your hair again?"

"Yes, please, Minerva." He sat on the edge of the bed, leaving the towel draped around him.

Minerva lit all of the candles and the lamps on either side of the bed. "There, that's better. Did you take your shower in the dark, Severus?"

He mumbled in response.

"What was that?"

"Can't light the candles anymore."

"Oh, well, we'll just have to get a couple automagical candles in here. Until then, just remind me, and I'll be happy to do it for you. And put them out, as well. Or Albus, when he is here." Minerva cast her drying spell on his hair.

"I forgot. I was supposed to tell you he won't be here until ten or later. I'm sorry."

"That's all right, Severus. I actually sent Wilsby for him a little while ago, and he stepped through for a few minutes. Now, let's get rid of that towel and you lie down, just like last night." As he lay down, she almost winced as she saw the scars on his back. She hated to imagine what might have caused them.

"If you don't like this scent, I'll send Wilsby for something different." Severus, however, seemed so anxious about the prospect of having Minerva touch him, he didn't say anything. He just lay there stiffly.

Minerva warmed a little oil in the palm of her hands. Fortunately, it smelled more of eucalyptus than cedar. She didn't want him smelling like he'd just come from winter storage, after all. She should have put more thought into the scent. Sitting close beside him on the bed, Minerva began by gently rubbing her hands in long strokes from his shoulders to his waist, getting him used to her touch. He flinched slightly before taking a deep breath and letting it out in a long sigh, relaxing under her touch. She then concentrated on his shoulders, spending time working on each one before gradually making her way down the rest of his back, occasionally putting a little more oil on her palms. The eucalyptus in the oil made it quite warming, and Minerva could feel Severus relaxing as she worked the oil into his skin, loosening his muscles as she went. When she had finished his back, she returned briefly to his shoulders, then she massaged each arm, much as he had done for her the previous evening, moving to the other side of the bed when she did his left arm. Bending at an angle to reach him was beginning to become uncomfortable; normally, she would have simply straddled him in order to be in a good position to reach both shoulders, but she didn't feel comfortable doing that yet.

Minerva rubbed each of his hands in turn, paying attention to each finger and each joint. He had rather nice hands long fingers, but strong and sturdy with a broad palm. Now his head. Severus flinched slightly at the unexpected touch as she worked her way from his neck to his scalp, occasionally lifting and turning his head to reach another area better. He seemed startled when she asked him to roll over. He must have thought she was finished, since he began to sit up, but she shook her head. She reached for her wand and doused the two lamps and a few of the candles, then cleansed her hands.

Minerva touched his face. "Close your eyes, Severus. Just close your eyes and relax."

She gently began rubbing his forehead, then the area between his eyes, his temples, his cheek bones, his jaw, spending more time gently massaging the temporomandibular joints. Minerva was pleased as she felt his jaw relaxing. She had thought to rub down his chest, as well, but she was getting tired; she'd save that for another time.

"How do you feel, Severus?"

"Mm, sleepily, actually. Good." He opened his eyes, a lazy smile on his face. A very un-Snape-like smile.

"Good, I'm glad. Why don't you put on your shirt, and we can talk?"

"Okay, Minerva." He reached out to Summon his shirt from across the room. *'Ehaah!'* he cried.

"What's wrong?!"

"Damned and damned again!" He held his hand to his chest. "I forgot. I can't do magic with my wand; I certainly can't do it without it." He shook out his hand.

"Is it all right?"

"Yes. Just tingles now."

"Here, I'll get it. Don't want to undo everything the massage accomplished by having you moving around too much right now. Here you are. Why don't you just slip that on and sit back against the head of the bed."

When he had resettled himself, Minerva asked, "Did you think at all about what I said about the ~~ad~~*adfectus* and what it might mean when we say that we won't let you die?"

"I'm sorry, my love. I have not." He looked quite distressed.

Minerva patted his leg. "That's all right, you can think about it now. What do you think we might mean?"

Severus looked at her a bit blankly. "I think you are very optimistic, Minerva," he finally said.

"Actually, I'm not particularly optimistic anymore that we will find a third option for you. You may have noticed that I spent most of the day in my Animagus form and did very little research."

"A *third* option, Minerva?"

"Yes, the third option being a counter-curse or an antidote to the spell, the second option being your continued suffering and eventual death. I believe we must, therefore, choose the first option."

"The first option." Severus blinked. "Death or a cure . . . you can't mean . . ." His eyes widened. "I must be misunderstanding you, Minerva. Could you tell me what the first option is? I am not thinking very clearly."

"The first option is to allow you to completely fulfill the demands of the imperative, Severus," Minerva said patiently, not removing her gaze from his face.

"To allow me . . . I'm sorry, Minerva. I thought you just said that the first option is to allow me to act on the imperative until . . . until the spell leaves on its own." Severus blushed.

"Yes. Exactly. You have understood me, then."

"Um, Minerva, I don't think you understand what that means . . ." Severus began.

"Of course I understand what it means, silly boy. Not only have I been doing all of this research for the past few days, but I am a mature witch ~~a~~*very* mature witch. I have no illusions about what this means." Severus stared at her, incredulous. "It means, Severus," she said, her Scottish burr becoming more pronounced, "it means that you and I must consummate the physical relationship. We must continue as we have done until we finally reach the point at which you and I have sex. Intercourse, Severus. Commonly and popularly known as fucking, screwing, banging, and several other such terms. None of which I particularly care to use when discussing what we will be doing, but which might clarify for you my understanding of what it will mean to completely fulfill the demands of the imperative."

Severus had flushed red as Minerva spoke, and now he opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He tried again.

"Severus, do say something. This is the most awkward conversation I have had with anyone in some time and I have had many an awkward conversation in my life, I assure you. It would be quite pleasant to know that the conversation is not one-sided."

"You are Minerva McGonagall." Severus croaked, as though that would explain his entire position on the matter.

Minerva laughed. "Yes, I do know my own name. You needn't remind me."

"But . . . why?"

"Because you need me and I can help you. We are friends, Severus."

"But Albus " Severus said, looking away from her, his voice breaking.

"Albus knows."

"He can't approve." His lips barely moved.

"He does. Although it is not his place to approve or disapprove, as I am sure he will tell you. Why do you think we have both been telling you we would not allow you to die from this curse? Even though we both had hoped to find a third option and I had great hopes at first that we would we knew this was a possibility. In fact, we discussed it at length on Saturday evening, and several times since. It has become clear that we are not going to find a third option, the second option is and always has been completely unacceptable, therefore we are going to proceed with the first option. I had thought to tell you this morning, although in retrospect, perhaps it would not have been the best time to do it just before you were about to teach. But tomorrow you are not teaching and we will be spending a lot of time together. It was important I tell you now so that we can continue to . . . become more comfortable with each other. I also thought it would be cruel and possibly dangerous not to discuss this with you, especially after the incident with the sleeping potion this morning."

"You . . . I . . . oh, gods, Minerva!" Severus buried his face in his arms and drew his knees to his chest.

Minerva moved closer to him. He was crying softly.

"Severus, Severus. Look at me, Severus."

He shook his head.

Shouldn't the spell have him rapturous about the idea of making love to her? Minerva moved up to sit beside him, putting her arm around his shoulders, which shook with his silent sobs.

"Tell me why you are crying, Severus. Please."

"I I how can you do this? You don't understand . . . you can't understand . . . it's me . . . you will hate me."

"Severus, listen to me, you are not in your right mind now. I know you, Severus. I have known you since you were eleven years old. I am not doing this blindly. It is my

choice, Severus. My choice. Do you understand me?"

This reaction was one that Minerva had not anticipated. To the extent she had considered his reaction, she had thought he would either ecstatically begin kissing her and extolling her virtues, or possibly be weeping with gratitude. She could even have imagined him telling her that she would loathe her touch. This, she had not expected.

"Severus . . . Severus, I gave you a massage, but you have not acted on the imperative in a while. Why don't we lie down together for a while, hmm? Here I am lying down, now you lie down beside me. Come, now, let me hold you as I did before."

With gentle coaxing and stroking, Minerva urged him down beside her. The imperative needed little encouragement. As soon as he lay beside her and she took him in her arms, he put his arm around her. Still silently weeping, he nuzzled her through her dressing gown and kissed her. Minerva stroked his hair then reached down and loosened the belt holding her robe closed. She then slowly moved aside her robe; Severus's lips moved to the skin left exposed by the low neck of her nightgown.

Minerva closed her eyes and found his hand; she brought it up and placed it with great deliberation and care on her partially exposed breast, then returned to stroking his hair as she felt him touching her through her gown. His head moved as his lips sought her other breast and began to kiss it, moving from soft skin to the soft silk barely covering her breast. His mouth found her nipple through the cloth of her gown as she continued to stroke his hair. As he fondled her breast with one hand and his kisses changed from light, feathery touches to hungrier movements of his lips, he discovered her nipple peaking beneath his attentions; Minerva began to gently run her fingers up and down the length of his spine.

Severus's tears had ceased as he kissed her; now his fingers were slipping beneath her gown, finding her other nipple, hesitating, then touching it tentatively. Minerva opened her eyes, took his hand away and eased him up from her. He lolled back against the pillow, eyes blank only a moment before he uttered a great sigh and closed them.

After a moment, he said, "Minerva. If I hadn't loved you, I should have loved you, though I suppose that makes little sense. I am sorry for my reaction. I am grateful. For that . . . what you said about the spell . . . and for just now. But please think more about this. What it means for you. Not just what you think it means for me." He opened his eyes and turned to look at her. "I love you, Minerva, I really do. And I shall never deserve you, not ever. And I certainly do not deserve what you are giving me . . . I gave you a pathetic box of candy and you are giving me yourself."

"I wouldn't say that, Severus," Minerva answered quietly. "Neither about the candy nor about what I am giving you. The chocolates were a lovely gift. Very thoughtful, especially since you had to go to some trouble to obtain them; given your current condition, that posed a physical and a mental challenge. As for what I am giving you, it is not insignificant, but I am not giving you myself, Severus. I am giving *from* myself, I suppose one could say."

"Thank you, Minerva. That is more than I have ever received from anyone before. Even if you were to stop now, I believe that would still be true."

Minerva sighed. "It is getting very late, Severus. I think we should go to sleep. Albus may be back, as well."

Severus nodded, and Minerva got up and found her wand. She cast some drying and freshening charms on her gown and robe before she carefully pulled her robe shut and retied the belt.

"Minerva? If Albus is here and awake, could you ask him to come in for a minute?"

"Yes. We all need our sleep, though, Severus, so if you want to have a long discussion with him, it should wait until tomorrow. He doesn't have a class to teach until the afternoon. You can talk to him again in the morning if you need to."

Severus nodded. "Are you coming back again?"

"I will bring you your potion as I did last night and stay until you are asleep."

Minerva left Severus's room to find Albus dozing in an armchair. She smiled fondly and kissed his cheek. "Time for bed, I think, my love," she whispered.

"Mmm?" Albus opened his eyes and smiled up at her. "All done, then? You had your talk, I presume."

"Yes. And it was peculiar. Well, more peculiar than I had expected," she said softly. "I'll talk to you more about it later, but he was in tears. Even after he had recovered from that and became more rational, he asked me to reconsider it and think of what it meant for me. He can't completely reject my offer, I think, because of the imperative, but I think that is what he would do if he were free of it."

"That does not come as a surprise to me, Minerva," Albus replied quietly. "Not that he would wish to reject the offer, anyway. He does not like being indebted to anyone, for one, and for another, he has been going through periods of despair these last few years, during which he does not wish to live. And his current existence is not one to be envied, but he does bravely continue on, despite that."

"He wanted to see you before I bring him his potion, Albus. I asked him to keep it brief, that you could speak again in the morning. Please bear that in mind yourself. You look tired." She stroked his face gently.

"I am a bit. But I will go see Severus. You fetch the draught. Give us a few minutes before bringing it, though, all right, my dear?"

When Minerva reentered the sitting room five minutes later, the door to Severus's bedroom was still closed, but she could hear their voices. She wondered when Albus had returned and how much he had heard through the door. Probably not very much, given how quietly they had both been speaking. Silence, of course, would have been indicative of Severus's activities. That couldn't have been pleasant for Albus, sitting there waiting for her, knowing that Severus was taking even greater liberties with her than before. She sat in the same armchair as Albus had, listening to their voices, making out snatches of conversation.

She heard Albus say, "No, no question of it . . ." Then Severus responded, but she could not understand his words. Albus replied, and she caught the last of what he said, ". . . more tomorrow, all right, my boy?" and the door opened.

Albus smiled to see her there, but Minerva thought he looked even more tired than he had when he went in. "He is ready for his potion now, my dear."

"All right. You go get ready for bed. I will be in soon." They touched each other briefly as Minerva headed toward Severus and Albus toward the bedroom, hands automatically reaching out and brushing the other in reminder of embraces past and embraces to come.

Severus was in the bathroom when she entered, so she stood by his bed and waited for him.

"Here you are, Severus. One dose of Albus's special sleeping potion. I'll put out the rest of the candles when I leave unless you would like me to leave one burning for you?"

"That would be kind of you, Minerva. Thank you."

Severus climbed into bed and Minerva handed him the potion before sitting with him and holding his hand. "Do not forget, Severus, that I am well and just a room away. When you awaken, you can come find me. If you dream, remember that I am close and that all is well," she said as his eyes began to blink and grow heavy.

When it was clear that he was asleep, Minerva smoothed his hair back from his forehead and whispered, "All is well, Severus. You are safe and I am near." She stood and doused all candles but one in the sconce by the door, leaving the door half-open on her way out.

She did the same in the sitting room, leaving one candle burning beside the door to the room she shared with Albus. He was in the bathroom when she came in, so she

hung her dressing gown up and waited for him to finish. As he came out and she went in, Albus gave her a minty kiss on the forehead as they passed each other.

When Minerva came out and got into bed beside Albus, she asked, "Do you mind if we keep one small candle lit? Severus can't manage the candles anymore. He can't do any magic at all, I don't believe. He has got to the point where it's still flowing through him quite adequately, but he has little control over it."

"Mmm, that's fine, my dear." Albus's eyes were closed as he lay on his back, on the verge of sleep. "That means he has another five to seven days before his magic begins draining. It will likely be a slow drain because of the high magical field of Hogwarts, but I think that gives us the outside limits for completing the spell's imperative."

"Although I don't want to rush this, I don't think I want to wait five days, either, Albus."

"Hm," Albus said sleepily. "You do it when you are comfortable, my dear." He rolled over to face her and opened his eyes. "Just proceed at the pace that feels right to you." He kissed her lips lightly.

Minerva snuggled against him. "I will. I wish I knew what pace would be most comfortable for you, though, Albus."

"Your pace, my dear, your pace is the most comfortable for me. I would be uncomfortable thinking you were going faster or more slowly because you thought it was what I wanted. This situation, by its very nature, is not comfortable for either of us. One of the few comforts I have is knowing that you are in control of the pacing." Albus's eyes had closed again as he spoke.

"Let's sleep now, and we can talk more in the morning, just as I instructed Severus, all right, my love?"

"Mmm," was the last thing either of them said until Severus came to their room in the middle of the night. Minerva was awake, lying with her arm around Albus and her head on his chest. Very light snores punctuated the otherwise silent bedroom. Minerva raised her head, sensing Severus at the door. She began to roll away from Albus to get out of bed, but Albus turned with her in his sleep and laid his arm over her in a movement he had done hundreds of times before. Minerva was lifting Albus's arm, trying to leave the bed without waking him, when Severus came around to her and placed a hand on her arm, stopping her.

Severus bent low over her. "No need to wake him, my darling, or to leave him," he whispered in her ear. He did not straighten then, but bent lower and kissed her ear, then her temple, the side of her face, and her cheek. He gingerly sat on the edge of the bed, keeping his right foot on the floor, half-kneeling beside her. He gently cupped her cheek and turned her face toward him, drawing back to look at her in the dim candlelight. "You are so very beautiful, my darling, so very beautiful, like a queen or a goddess," he whispered.

Severus leaned forward and placed a tentative kiss on Minerva's lips. As she had earlier, she allowed her lips to soften and respond to his. It was odd, odder even than when he had lain on the bed with her on Sunday morning, Albus on the other side of her. She was partially in Albus's embrace, his familiar warmth behind and around her, and yet Severus was kissing her. The thought crossed her sleepy mind that she probably should have simply risked waking Albus and left the room with Severus, but it felt nicer, somehow, more secure, to have Albus there behind her, his arm around her, as Severus kissed her.

Severus carefully avoided disturbing Albus's hand where it rested on Minerva's side as he continued to kiss her lips and raise a hand to caress her throat then her breast. His kisses continued, and his fingers moved aside the fabric of her nightgown, accessing her breast and baring her nipple. Severus sighed as he carefully explored her breast. Only with Bella had he ever done something similar, and he was fairly sure that Minerva's desires would be quite different from those of the youthful, but already-debauched Death Eater.

With Severus's sigh and his gentle fingers stroking her nipple, Minerva parted her lips and took in his breath before pulling his lower lip into her own and kissing it with somewhat more energy than she had before.

One hand still holding Minerva's head, the other fondling her breast, Severus drew back slightly to look at Minerva, seeing only her and her beauty. His breath had quickened and his pulse raced as he lowered himself once more to kiss her lips then to kiss her neck. His mouth moved to replace the hand that had taken pleasure in Minerva's breast, delighting in the peaked nipple that rose up under his inexperienced but caring touch. First he only kissed the creamy flesh of her breast, but then his lips found her nipple and kissed it experimentally. Just as his lips were closing around the aroused flesh, Minerva pushed him away.

"Too much, Severus, too much," she whispered, feeling guilty.

Severus straightened and nodded before rising from the bed.

"Do you need some potion, Severus?"

He shook his head.

"Sure?"

He nodded.

"If you can't sleep," Minerva whispered, "come back and fetch me."

As soon as Severus left the room, Minerva felt Albus's arm tighten around her slightly, and his left arm pushed its way under her to hold her close.

"Albus?"

"Mmm."

"You're awake?"

"Mhmm. Since Severus sat on the bed, I think," Albus said softly.

"Oh, gods, Albus, I am sorry. I should have just gotten up." Minerva felt dreadful.

"Don't worry. It's . . . okay. At first, I was, I admit, quite uncomfortable, but then, I am somewhat embarrassed to say, I was only slightly uncomfortable, and for a different reason." He pulled her closer, and Minerva felt his erection press firmly against her back.

"You found that . . . ?" Minerva didn't know what to say.

"Do not mistake me, Minerva, I have never harboured the desire to listen and watch as another man kissed you and fondled you, and certainly not at the same time as I was holding you, but for some reason, my body did find it . . . arousing," he whispered.

"Oh. Well. I suppose that physical arousal is sometimes possible even in unusual circumstance."

"Yes, it is," he said, gently pushing himself against her. "I remember a particular breakfast before we were first together in which I thought the circumstances were most inappropriate for such a thing, and yet one glance at your lovely cleavage, and I was required to retire to the bathroom for some strong Cooling Charms." He chuckled softly.

"I wasn't doing anything provocative, Albus, you know that. I had wanted to look nice for you, but I wasn't trying to be sexy." They had had this conversation before, but not for many years.

"You don't have to do anything to try to be 'sexy,' my dear. You are always attractive. And your breasts are exceptionally lovely." His left hand had worked its way up to her left breast and was squeezing it gently. "I do wish I had two hands, though." He sighed.

"You do quite well with one, Albus."

"Not for what I want to do at this moment. I suppose a little magic might assist me, though."

Minerva felt her nightgown being pulled up at the back, and she could feel his erection straining against her, only his nightshirt between them. Then the nightshirt was not there and Albus's left hand was moving down her stomach to her pelvis, then his fingers found her soft lips. "Mmm. I do so love touching you, my dearest Minerva," he whispered hoarsely.

"Severus might return."

"Probably not for an hour yet. Longer if we are fortunate. And this will not take long."

"That is what we thought the day that he came back early and saw us in the mirror." Despite her protest, she bent her top leg to grant him easier access. Under his gentle, teasing touches, Minerva's moisture grew until she became quite wet. She moaned slightly, but attempted one more protest. "You should be resting, and I really don't want him to watch us again."

"This is better for me than sleep, my sweetest love," he whispered as he moved to position himself. Without his right hand to guide him, and his left hand occupied in its pleasuring of Minerva's sensitive clit, Albus had some difficulty, and his cock slid against her opening without entering. Before he could become impatient or frustrated at his inability to enter her as smoothly as it seemed he had always done, Minerva had reached between them. When Albus felt her palm against the head of his cock, he pulled back and thrust forward again, this time, Minerva's hand provided just enough guidance for him to push into her soft, warm folds.

Albus sighed softly and kissed Minerva's shoulder. He didn't move immediately, but continued to pleasure her with his fingers until she squirmed. He began to slowly move his hips to withdraw slightly and push back in. He could tell from the way she turned her head into her pillow to stifle a moan that he was striking the right spot. A whispered spell bared her shoulder to him, and he began to kiss and nip with his lips as he thrust with his cock and fondled her clit with his fingers. Minerva continued to gasp and moan lowly into her pillow until she clutched the pillow, her legs trembling, and Albus felt her orgasm flow in waves around his cock, a long and deep orgasm that triggered his own as he pulled her against him with his left hand and thrust into her from behind. His own orgasm seemed to go on forever, despite his relatively small ejaculation, having spent himself in her so recently.

After holding her a while longer, both of them catching their breath and waiting for their hearts to resume their normal pace, Albus pulled out of her and rolled onto his back. He cast light cleansing charms on the bed and on himself, then cleaned the wetness from Minerva's inner thighs. Minerva rolled around toward him, pulling her nightgown back down as she did so.

She traced his face with her fingers and kissed him. "You haven't done that in a long time," she whispered.

"Which, interrupted our sleep for sex or entered you from behind?"

"Both, I suppose, but mainly the first."

Albus kissed her. "Perhaps I should do that more often."

"I think it is more fun when it is an occasional treat," Minerva answered softly, returning his kiss. She drew back and looked into his eyes. "This isn't simply about being aroused in the middle of the night, whatever the cause, and wanting to make love, is it, Albus?"

"I was aroused, you were next to me, you aroused easily, and it was lovely. I don't believe we need analyse it any further than that."

The corner of her mouth quirked up at that. "All right. As long as you know that I will always want you, always want to be with you, and I will never leave you, even if we were never to make love again."

Albus swallowed. "I know that. Of course I know that."

"All right. You do know that we make love all of the time, Albus, not only when we are having sex. We don't need to even touch each other to make love. Just as sex is more than just sex when it is with you, making love with you means more than just physical touching. I would gratefully spend every day loving you for the rest of our lives, basking in your love for me, even if we were never able to do this again."

Albus said hesitantly, "Do you not want to do it anymore?"

"What? Oh, no, Albus, that is not what I was saying at all. Of course I want to. Always. I always want to make love with you, feel you touch me, touch you, have you inside of me, filling me. But if we couldn't, for some reason illness or injury or something of that sort I would miss it, of course, but because it is one expression of our love for each other. There are others."

"You are a very passionate woman, Minerva. If something were to happen to me, and I couldn't make love to you anymore, or I couldn't perform adequately, wouldn't you miss it? Wouldn't you want it still?"

"I would want whatever it was we could still have together. I would not want to find some random wizard to have sex with, if that is what you are suggesting, Albus or even some not-random wizard," Minerva said as Albus opened his mouth. She knew he was going to protest that it wouldn't have to be a "random" wizard. Minerva was not going to bring Severus's name into the conversation unless Albus did, but she felt he was feeling somewhat insecure and left out in this bizarre situation. "I honestly never dreamed I would ever have any other man touch me again but you, Albus. Even before we were together, I wanted only you. I occasionally settled for some lesser wizard, one I didn't really want, thinking it was practical of me to do so, but it has always been you who has held my heart, and it always will be. Even if you die before I do, which I have always recognised was likely, given our relative ages, I will not want another wizard. I am yours forever. You are stuck with me, Albus. But I did try to warn you of that!" she said with a slight smile.

"You shouldn't be so absolute about it, Minerva. After I die "

"Forty or fifty years after you die, I might find myself some old, congenial wizard to spend my declining years with, in chaste, platonic companionship. You may not believe me, but it is the truth." She caressed his face. "Now, we should get some sleep. When Severus comes in next, I am going to leave the room with him, and then, if it is before five in the morning, I am going to give him some sleeping potion. It shouldn't matter to the *Adfectus* if he sleeps a bit late."

"Just a half dose, Minerva. It is rather addictive, and I don't want him having to deal with withdrawal later on. I'll come up with a different formula today that will help keep his body from adapting and becoming dependent on the specific potion."

Minerva clucked. "I do not know how you think you can keep going like this, Albus. I'm actually glad that this accident has at least kept you in the castle where I can keep an eye on you. You are running yourself into the ground."

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Just sleep a while, all right, my dear? And I will hold you."

Minerva turned and settled as Albus spooned behind her, kissing the nape of her neck before closing his eyes to sleep.

"I love you, Albus."

"I am forever blessed that you do, my dear, for I love you above all others and cannot imagine life without you."

Severus had returned to his bedroom, lain down on his bed, and stared up at the ceiling. He didn't sleep, but merely waited for the satisfaction of his encounter with Minerva to gradually fade and be replaced by longing, then by uneasiness, then by fear and anxiety. He would not allow himself to be reduced to a quivering wreck of a wizard before he returned to her, he decided. Minerva hated it when he waited so long that the edges of madness began to close in. At some point, he might wait so long that it caused her great difficulty to pull him back to himself. Now that he knew what she had meant when she had repeatedly told him she would not allow him to go mad and die, he saw no point in waiting. Before, he always had the thought somewhere in his mind that he would go mad, anyway, so he was only delaying the inevitable. It had made it easier for him justifying his suffering to allow Minerva to rest and to give Albus some peace.

In the clarity of mind that followed his moments with Minerva, he had gone from focussing on his anger, hatred, and resentment toward the situation, to worrying about what this would mean for him when the spell's imperative demanded satisfaction that he could not give it, to being concerned about what this all might be doing to Minerva and to Albus. Now that he knew there was an end in sight, likely just a few days away, he wasn't sure what to think about.

Severus had tried to talk to Albus that night about what this would mean for his role as a spy once he was freed from the spell, but Albus had declined to discuss it. Severus had hope that Albus would finally allow him to cease spying after this. Surely he would see that Severus could no longer continue with the plans they had made.

The sad fact was, if Severus ceased spying for Albus, he certainly would never choose to return to the Death Eaters, since his role as a spy was all that had kept him in their ranks. Voldemort did not tolerate turncoats, however, and a spy would certainly earn his greatest wrath. This meant that Severus would be marked for death if he were to leave the Death Eaters. It was unlikely that even Hogwarts could provide him with adequate protection if the Dark Lord wanted him dead.

Severus had tried to tell Albus that as he did not believe he could continue in his double-role if he were to fulfill the *Adfectus* with Minerva, and that if Albus persisted in his stand that he and the Order would not shelter him if he quit the Death Eaters, then he should simply tell Minerva to let Severus die now, since he would be dead later, anyway. It had seemed perfectly logical to Severus, but Albus had not seen the logic of his argument. Well, he hadn't accepted one of Severus's premises, which meant that the rest of his argument fell on deaf ears. No, Albus would not consider allowing Severus to cease his double-role. He told him, as he had many times before, that he was free to cease bringing back information from Voldemort and to quit his membership in the Order of Phoenix, but that if Severus wanted to continue his association with him and with the Order, he had to continue as a spy.

Albus wasn't being entirely cold-hearted when he said that; Severus recognised that. He was simply realistic. He knew that the only way out of the Death Eaters was through death. Any who had taken the Mark and who later tried to escape Voldemort's tyranny were systematically found and murdered, generally quite horrifically. Albus told him that the only choice that he could give him was to continue to work for the Order and spy on Voldemort, or to not work for the Order at all. Albus had made it clear that, unless he had some evidence that Severus had a change of heart about his true allegiance to Voldemort, he was welcome to stay at Hogwarts and continue to teach even if he were no longer working for the Order. Severus could still even pretend to spy on him and Potter for the Dark Lord, although Albus would no longer help him concoct stories to keep the megalomaniac happy.

Albus simply would not allow Severus to quit the Death Eaters and work only for the Order. "There would be no point to it, Severus, if I were to agree that you could continue to work for the Order but with the option to no longer spy on him," Albus had said, more than once. "It would only provide you with greater temptation to quit the Death Eaters, and you and I both know that you would not survive very long if you were to do that. Look at what happened to Sirius when we tried to hide him at Grimmauld Place. His situation was different, in that he had never been a Death Eater, but you would not tolerate the seclusion, isolation, and inactivity any better than he did, yet that is the life you would be forced into if you left Tom and then only until some ruse drew you from Headquarters' protective wards and you were killed, just as Sirius was. Not to mention the agony Tom could cause you through your Mark. If your double role is revealed, of course I will do all I can to protect you, and you would remain within the Order. We would do our best to help you, then, my boy. But you cannot simply quit Tom's little club. You know that as well as I do."

Severus resented Albus immensely for that. It was *his* life. He should be able to quit the Death Eaters and no longer grovel in faked allegiance to the Dark Lord if that was what he wished to do. But if he were to quit without Albus's blessing and protection, he would very likely be dead soon thereafter. He did have the choice to quit anyway, of course, and to take his chances. And it *would* be nice to be free of both the Dark Lord and the Order but that freedom would only last as long as he could avoid being killed, which would not be very long. So he could either quit both the Death Eaters and the Order and be killed, or he could just quit the Order, which provided him with the only reason to remain with the Death Eaters in the first place other than his desire to live, of course, but that desire had waned as the years passed.

Albus had given him a gift when he had come to him, repentant, late that fateful summer, but it was not a gift without strings. Albus's forgiveness had been freely given, but his gift of redemption or of the possibility of redemption was costly. Severus had brought it all on himself through his own foolishness and wickedness, but he still resented it.

It only complicated matters that he had once again made a very bad decision and taken that Unbreakable Vow a few months ago. When he made it, he hadn't even been sure what it was that the Vow was going to require of him in the end, but if it was something the Dark Lord wanted, it had to be very bad, indeed. Severus believed that as long as he was likely to die from breaking the Unbreakable Vow, he might as well stop spying now and take his chances, but Albus hadn't seen it that way. Albus had said that they would consider that option only once they had exhausted other options. And despite everything, including his resentment, Severus nonetheless loved the old wizard.

As Severus lay there, the satisfaction from his encounter slowly bleeding away and the emptiness and longing oozing in to take its place, he wondered at his own allegiance to the old wizard. At first, it had been out of a sense of obligation mixed with some gratitude, that he had stayed at Hogwarts after the Dark Lord's apparent demise. But as Severus continued to work at the school, aware that Albus believed that Voldemort was not yet fully departed from this world and that he would eventually be called on again to spy for him and his Order, Severus grew to care for the Headmaster. Now, lying there with his protective layers of resentment and anger weakened by the *Adfectus*, Severus knew that he loved Albus more than he had loved anyone until he had discovered his love for Minerva. In fact, his love for Albus could have, in some odd way, sparked his love for Minerva, for he had always admired her devotion and loyalty to him, and when Severus had learned of their relationship a few years after he had begun teaching, the part of him that didn't scoff at such things as sentimental and meaningless had thought it was good that Albus had someone to share his life with.

Tears pricked his eyes. When this was over, he knew, Minerva would return to Albus, and he would be left alone. Completely alone again. He did not know if he could bear it. And, despite her kind words to the contrary, Minerva would likely resent him when it was over. She would no longer wish to be near him, even as a friend, even in the paltry friendship they had shared before the spell had hit him. Severus wept unselfconscious tears of self-pity. He was always alone, and now it would be worse. He hugged his pillow and cried himself dry.

As his tears petered out, Severus began to feel a mounting longing to be with Minerva and express his love to her. He held his pillow to his chest and waited until he began to tremble slightly, then rose and walked in the dim light to return to his love and shower her with affection.

Minerva and Albus had fallen asleep, and Severus walked around the bed to awaken Minerva. She stirred when he caressed her face. Blinking her eyes open, she gently disengaged herself from Albus's embrace, then rolled out of bed. She took Severus's hand and led him out to the sitting room, closing the door behind them. As she walked, she could feel a bit of wetness run from her, and she thought she ought to have cleaned up better before going back to sleep.

"Severus, wait here for me just a moment. I will be right back."

Minerva returned a few minutes later, cleaner and fresher. Severus was sitting, slumped, in the centre of the couch.

"Scoot over and I will join you for a little while."

Severus looked up, pale and ashen. "Do you always do that after I leave you? Do you always do it . . . so often?"

"What?" Minerva stiffened.

"I may not be myself, Minerva, and the *Adfectus* may have interfered with many of my senses, but my nose is still functioning quite well."

"Oh." Minerva looked at him. She doubted that she would have noticed such a thing, but Severus had spent years relying on his sense of smell when making potions and choosing ingredients. "I really do not believe it is any of your business, Severus. However, your first question is completely foolish, since you know that you see me at least a dozen times during the day, and even if Albus were available each time, I doubt very much that we could accomplish what you are suggesting with that frequency." Her jaw was tight and her hands clenched as she attempted to control her irritation with him. "The only reason I answer you at all and do not simply tell you to be on your way is that I am quite certain it would never enter your head to ask me such a thing if you weren't under the influence of the spell."

Severus looked down. Finally, he whispered, "I just thought you might be trying to rid yourself of my touch, that's all. By doing that, I mean."

Minerva remembered her visit to Albus in the shower. It hadn't been exactly that she had wanted to rid herself of Severus's touch so much as she had wished to replace it with Albus's, yet she could see how he could come to the conclusion he had and how it must hurt him.

Minerva closed her eyes a moment and forced herself to relax. "Shove over, Severus," she said, "and I'll sit with you a while."

Severus budged over a few inches, but did not raise his head.

"Severus, you are beginning to shake. Be reasonable," Minerva said, realising immediately how foolish such a command was. "You need to satisfy the imperative." She held out her hand to him, but with his head down, he didn't see it. Minerva sighed and waved her wand to light a few more candles. She took his head in her hands and forced him to turn and look at her.

"Severus, Albus woke up. Whilst you were there. That's all. I really don't want to discuss it beyond that; this is an awful, unnatural, and perpetually awkward situation. We all have to face that. I am sorry if you feel hurt. I certainly do not want to hurt you, Severus."

"I love you, Minerva," he whispered.

Minerva bit back a sigh, aware of how it would be interpreted by the cursed wizard. "I know you do, my dear. And I love you, too; that's why I wouldn't want to hurt you if I could avoid it. You are my very dear friend, Severus," she said, looking into his deep brown eyes, filled with tears ready to spill past his lids. "Ah, Severus, my poor boy. You are always the walking wounded, aren't you?"

As Severus's spell-addled brain tried to make sense of her last comments, Minerva leaned forward and kissed him, pulling him toward her. As she felt him relax and she knew the *Adfectus* was taking control of his actions, she gently eased him back to lie against the arm of the sofa and followed, still kissing him. Having had the blunt discussion with Severus the previous night had truly brought home the reality of what they were going to have to do in order to free him from the spell. And, as she had said to Albus, she could not imagine having this situation continue indefinitely, but neither did she want to dive into sex with him especially not the long love-making the curse seemed to require. A simple in-and-out with the afflicted wizard achieving orgasm was not what the spell considered the "ultimate act of love."

"Put your arms around me, Severus," she whispered before kissing him again. When he had done that, she said, "Your kisses have been very nice, Severus, but you were wondering how you might best bring me pleasure, so I thought I would show you what I like, then you can try it on me, how's that?"

The spell-enthralled wizard nodded and moved forward to find her lips again.

"Slow down, Severus. Let me show you first, okay, here, like this . . . and this . . . and this . . .," she said, kissing him and gently caressing his face, combing his hair back with her fingers, and tenderly stroking his chest and side with her other hand. Finally, she drew back and whispered, "And like this open a little, mmmhm." Minerva drew back again, "Don't do anything with your tongue quite yet, Severus." He had responded to her initial foray into his mouth by plunging his tongue to the back of her throat. No finesse. Such grace, normally, but no finesse there.

Minerva slowly demonstrated when to stroke with a soft tongue, when to stroke with it hard, how to tease and how to tantalise, then she nudged his tongue with her own and let him play a bit, moving his tongue about in her mouth. Better than the gagging thrust he had attempted a moment ago, anyway, Minerva thought as she grew somewhat bored. She sat back a little and looked at him. His eyes were dilated and completely black, his breathing was ragged, and she could feel his erection through his thin pyjamas.

"It's nice, when being kissed, for me anyway, to have other parts of my body stimulated, as well, much as you were doing earlier when you were kissing me and touching me at the same time. Why don't we reverse positions now, and you see how you can do with that I am very glad you want to please me, Severus," she added, hoping that his male ego hadn't felt injured by her instructions, but his desire to please her was so strong, he showed no sign of resenting her words.

Minerva moved off him and lay back against the other armrest. She had some trepidation about Severus lying on top of her, but whenever she had told him to stop in the past, he had, no matter what he had been doing. And Albus was in the next room if he didn't stop this time.

She needn't have worried, she realised as Severus approached her so tentatively that he allowed almost none of his weight rest on her. She smiled and put her arms around him.

"Oh, gods, Minerva, you are incredible . . . I love you so," he whispered hoarsely before kissing her, proceeding almost exactly as she had done, beginning with tender, soft kisses, then more energetic ones, until he licked her lips and began to caress her mouth and tongue with his own. Remembering what she had said about being touched, he moved his hand from beside her head, where it had supported some of his weight, and began to caress Minerva's side and her breast. Her nightgown was thin and loose, and he easily moved it aside, sliding the strap from her shoulder and baring her breast to his fingers. At first, his touch was light and languid, but then he took her nipple and rubbed it between his fingers; when he pinched too hard, Minerva gasped slightly and moved his hand away before gently pushing him to sit up. She quickly covered her breast. Somehow it was one thing for him to touch it, or even to kiss it, and quite another for him to look at it.

Severus blinked a few times, then moved to allow Minerva to sit up.

"Was it . . . okay?" he asked.

"Fine, except that my nipples are fairly sensitive a touch can go from being pleasantly stimulating to being too rough quite easily. You learn very quickly, Severus, and I hope it was also nice for you to do." Minerva, as much as she didn't want to feel used, also did not want to feel as though she were using him, either. She may have decided to try to enjoy it, but that didn't mean that she could treat him as an object, either.

"It was very nice, Minerva. Better, actually." He squirmed slightly. "Can I tell you something? It's . . . private. I mean, I wouldn't tell anyone else this."

"Of course, Severus. And I won't tell anyone, even Albus."

"You can tell Albus, if you want to. That's only fair, I suppose. But only if you need to. And not anyone else."

"Of course not. You have my word."

"I haven't been with very many women, Minerva. When I was young, no one wanted me, really. I had sex for the first time with a, um, lady of the evening when I was seventeen. It wasn't very good. I actually wondered what all the fuss was about. It seemed easier and cheaper just to . . . you know, take care of myself." Severus grew red. "But I thought maybe I'd just picked a bad one, so I went to Knockturn Alley and paid a bit more money for a prettier, younger one, and it was still not very good. Better than the first time, though. I thought it was me, but then the girl told me that if I thought it was going to get any better, I'd have to pay a lot more than I had. So I came back the next day. This time, she took off all her clothes that cost extra and she, um, she did a few more things for me before we actually, you know, and it was better, but it was very expensive. But one of the things she did, well, that was actually pretty good, and she told me I could buy that separate if I wanted to. It was even cheaper than a plain fuck I'm sorry, Minerva!"

"No, go on. So it was cheaper than a plain fuck. I'm listening, Severus."

"Yes, so I decided to do that from then on. Sometimes I'd pay a little extra to feel the girl's breasts, but not often. They wear pretty revealing robes, so I could see a lot, and that was enough. Sometimes, though, I'd pay something more so she would, um, finish me, um, well, cleanly, I suppose you'd say."

"You mean that you decided to have a prostitute give you blow jobs and then you occasionally would pay extra to have her swallow." At his wide-eyed stare and open mouth, Minerva said, "I am not naive, Severus. I told you that I am a mature witch. I am not, and have never been, what one might call 'easy,' but I did have a life before I came to Hogwarts to teach, you know. I lived in London for quite a while. It is difficult to live in a big city and not be at least marginally aware of what goes on in the world."

"Yes, well, it's as you said, Minerva. And there's really only been one witch I've been with who hasn't been a prostitute. And I don't believe that her tastes were exactly normal. I always thought that if I did what she wanted me to, it would mean she would . . . care for me. And that I would be enough for her. But I wasn't. And then finally she wanted me to do something I couldn't do, or that I wouldn't do, anyway, and after that . . . she didn't have much use for me. I guess she's even worse now, but although she's invited me to join her, I haven't. I decided that I might be pathetic having to resort to blow jobs from prostitutes in order to have sex, but I wasn't so pathetic that I would submit to her demands. Now, of course, I don't really go anywhere to get even that much contact, but it was never that good, anyway."

Minerva had a suspicion of who the witch in question was, but since he hadn't said her name, she didn't either.

"You have not had a life conducive to developing any kind of relationships, Severus. It is hardly surprising that you have not found women with whom to have liaisons, or even to develop an attachment to. I think you could, though. In the future, when you don't have such a difficult role to play, you could probably have a relationship with someone if you wanted to."

Severus shook his head. "Perhaps, but I doubt it. I will not live to see the end or I will live only to see the end and then be killed. If by some quirk of fate I live beyond that, I have no doubt that I will, at best, live as an outcast, at worst, be sentenced to life in Azkaban."

"Albus and I will not let that happen."

Severus looked away. "I don't want to talk about this any longer."

"All right, Severus. You know, it's not yet five. Albus said you could have a half dose of potion. Why don't I get that for you and you can go back to bed for a while. We can even sleep late, if we like, since we don't have to teach. It will be like a holiday," she said brightly, wondering how long he would sleep on a half dose.

Seven forty-five brought her the answer to that question as she was awoken by the touch of a hand on her face. When she opened her eyes to see Severus's face hovering over hers, it was difficult not to let out a groan of frustration. Instead, she stifled a yawn and said, "Morning, Severus."

"Good-morning, Minerva, my goddess." He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips.

Minerva held up her hand, "Wait, Severus, I need to use the bathroom, and I would prefer it if you would wait for me in the sitting room."

Severus nodded meekly and immediately headed for the door. Minerva stretched in bed.

"You should get up, Minerva. Don't make him wait. You know that if you told him to wait, he would wait until he began to go mad."

"Mmm, I know. I'm just very tired of this. I think we're making progress, though." She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. After a moment, she padded into the bathroom. When she came out, Albus had moved to her side of the bed and had fallen asleep again on her pillow. He had told her once that he liked to do that because her pillow smelled of her and he slept better.

Minerva kissed his cheek lightly before putting on her dressing gown and slippers and joining Severus in the sitting room.

"How are you feeling this morning, Severus?" she asked as she sat beside him.

"Mmmph. I don't think I like this potion very well but don't tell Albus. I am grateful to him for making it for me."

"Why? Did you have more nightmares?"

"No, strangely enough, although I did have some very odd dreams. I dreamt I was a Muggle in one of them. I had a wife and children, and a Muggle job teaching high school chemistry. And I didn't miss magic at all. Bizarre." He shook his head and blinked. "No, it's the way it makes me feel. It's not just the *Adfectus*. I feel very groggy and stupid, Minerva."

Minerva let him put his arms around her and begin his routine of kissing her neck and face. "He's changing the formula for you today, brewing you a new batch. I'll mention the side-effects to him."

"Mmm. But this is nice. Mmm. Such soft, wonderful skin." He nuzzled her.

"My skin is not as it once was, Severus. And remember what I said about scars? You have never mentioned mine, yet you must have seen them." Although Minerva's everyday robes covered her scar completely, the nightgown she had worn that night had not. He had also exposed more of it when he had moved her gown aside.

"Your scars? You mean these marks? Are they from last June?"

"Yes, those marks. They are from last June, yes."

"How far down do they go?" he asked, touching the one of them and running his finger down it.

"Far enough. There are a few, actually."

"Four stunners to the chest. I didn't know then that I loved you, but it still upset me. I was very glad to see you return as soon as you did."

"I know." For Severus, he had been practically ebullient. Not that most people would have noticed the gleam in his eye when he saw her walking toward him, nor noticed how he had to put extra effort into maintaining his nasty anti-Gryffindor attitude. After all of the students had been sent on their way and there were none present to remark on his behaviour, he had kindly offered his arm to assist her up the stairs, and then was the very picture of a gentleman as he had escorted her to her office. "You were quite a gentleman. I appreciated it."

"May I see them, Minerva? Your scars?" Then he added quickly, "Never mind, you don't have to. That was rude of me."

"No, not rude. If you had asked at some other time, it would have been. But I have seen yours, after all, and we have developed a different sense of comfort with each other than we had. Do you mind if I wait to show them to you, though?"

"Not at all, and you don't have to if you don't wish to. In fact, if you wish, we can keep them covered . . . or make the room dark. I promised Albus that I would help you be comfortable. Even if the *Adfectus* did not demand that I show you love and gentleness, I only want you to be comfortable, Minerva."

She kissed his cheek. "I know that, dear. I am getting hungry. But I can't decide whether I am more tired than hungry. I'd rather like to go back to bed for a little while."

"And rejoin Albus."

"Yes." Minerva looked at Severus, wondering what his next reaction would be.

"That's good, Minerva. And I have an idea. What's that elf's name? She doesn't like me very well, Minerva. I suppose I should expect it, though. Most humans don't like me, after all."

"Her name is Wilspy Will -spee. And it isn't personal. She doesn't approve of this situation and it hasn't been explained to her."

"She's a house-elf! Why would she expect an explanation? Or even think to disapprove? Anyone else would discipline such a house-elf, Minerva. You are too kind to her."

"No, she is kind to me. And to Albus. I am not going to discipline her for having opinions, although it can occasionally be annoying, and I most certainly am not going to discipline her for taking good care of Albus. You must imagine what this looks like to her. She has been with Albus for far longer than I have, Severus."

"All right, Minerva. If you say so. Other than the house-elves who have served me here at Hogwarts, I've never had one. But that one is unusual, in my experience." With that pronouncement, he called out, "Wilspy!"

With only a slight delay, Wilspy Apparated into the room. "Professor Snape has called Wilspy?" the elf said stiffly.

"Wilspy, please address Professor Snape just as you would one of us."

Severus looked at Minerva quizzically.

"Yes, ma'am, Professor Dumbledore's Professor Minerva." She turned back to Severus. "You called me, Professor Snape? Can I help you?"

"Um, yes, Wilspy. Professor McGonagall is going to go back to bed now. In a little while, I would like you to bring her and Professor Dumbledore a nice breakfast in bed. Minerva, what would you both like?"

"Wilspy can decide she knows us well. But you should have some breakfast, too. Wilspy, bring Professor Snape a breakfast you believe he will enjoy. Serve it to him wherever he'd like it. Oh, and bring a *Daily Prophet*."

"Yes, ma'am." Wilspy winked out of the room.

"Now you can go rejoin Albus. I will be fine for a while. I may even go back to bed, myself. I feel quite groggy."

"You're right; it is probably the potion. Mention it to him when you see him, just in case I forget."

"I will, Minerva . . . may I kiss you once more before you leave?"

Minerva looked at Severus, and she was struck again how very different he seemed. Was this the wizard underneath the other persona he normally displayed to the world? Not so slow-witted, of course . . . She gestured to him to come to her, and then closed her eyes as his lips touched hers.

Ten: Acts of Love

Chapter 10 of 16

Severus and Minerva move toward freedom from the *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus*.
A response to the Potter Place Winter Prompt Challenge #22.



Chapter Ten: Acts of Love

"Albus, you must read this there's an article here saying that I'm at death's door!" Minerva handed him the *Daily Prophet*. "I never would think that my illness would rate even a single paragraph in that rag, let alone a full column on page three."

"Mmm, above the fold in the top right-hand corner, as well. You have almost arrived. It's only a matter of time before you make headlines wait, you've done that already, haven't you!" Albus chuckled. "Hmm. Well, at least there's nothing inaccurate. Other than the fact that the entire thing is a fabrication, of course. It would be the one time that the paper got all of the details right. Oh, did you see they've put a little box down here with all of the things you can expect to have wrong with you once you've recovered. Unless you die, as they so charitably remind their readers. Mmm. I didn't realise that crossed-eyes might be one of your residual problems. I'm sorry, my dear, but if you go cross-eyed, I shall have to leave you . . . it would be most disconcerting!" he teased.

"Cross-eyed! Hmmpf! Let me have that back. You are not showing the proper amount of appreciation for my grave illness at all!" Minerva laughed.

"Oh, my, this does not sound very good," she said, looking at the list. "I do hope they are all optional. Of course I could always claim to be suffering from the fourth one. No one would dare question that."

"Which one was that, my dear?"

"Loss of libido." They both chuckled and finished their breakfasts.

"I think you should use the bathroom first, Albus. I need to go make sure that Severus hasn't allowed himself to enter a catatonic state just so that we could have a peaceful breakfast."

"Yes, and Remus will be here soon. I want to get up to the Great Hall in a few minutes. I should have left already, in fact."

Minerva finished her tea then walked out to the sitting room where she found Severus, fully dressed and reading the *Daily Prophet*. Wilsby must have brought him one, as well. Perhaps she was softening toward him.

"Did you find anything of interest, Severus?"

"Yes, a witch in Darrowby has written in for advice. She thinks that her son's wife is having an affair and she wants to know what to do about it. Thing is, she thinks that the affair is with her other son. She's afraid of alienating them both. And there's a girl who is suffering from unrequited love. She loves her best friend, but he just thinks of her as one of his mates. She wants to know how to get him to notice that she's not exactly like the blokes he hangs about with, as she puts it in her letter."

"You didn't look at the news items?"

"No, did I miss something?"

Minerva took the newspaper from him and had just found the article when Albus bustled through. "Severus, may I Floo through to your office? I am running a bit late, and your office is closer to the Great Hall."

"Of course, Albus."

"Here, Severus, read this we made the papers."

Severus read in silent concentration. He had taken hold of her hand when she passed him the *Prophet*, and he hadn't noticed. Minerva stood patiently as he held her hand and read the story.

"How odd. It's accurate. At least as accurate as it could be considering the entire story is a falsehood."

"Mmm. I wonder who their source was."

"Must have been someone who was there. And someone who likes you and doesn't dislike me. Perhaps a member of the staff although they should all know better."

"I liked the description of you carrying me from the hall. It was almost as though I was there. Which I was, but I wasn't in much of a position to appreciate much more than the fact that you were carrying me and keeping me from hurting myself."

"I don't want to think about that, Minerva. It was very difficult for me." He raised her hand to his mouth. "I need to make a very brief appearance in the Great Hall before I leave for Mongolia. May I kiss you before I go?"

Minerva smiled. "Of course you may, Severus."

He stood and looked down at her, caressing her face before tilting her chin and bending down to kiss her. He kissed her gently, softly, sensually, and he put an arm around her to pull her closer. Minerva put one arm around his waist and one hand on his shoulder. Hmm. This wizard learned quickly. The imperative compelled him further, and he began to push her dressing gown from her, trying to get closer, trying to show her his love for her. Minerva pulled back. "Severus Severus you have to go now."

Severus gazed at her a moment, then dropped his hands. "Yes. Yes, of course."

Twenty-five minutes later, Albus and Severus Flooed back to the suite. "I thought that went quite well, Severus. I believe that Remus appreciated the handshake. It was very collegial of you."

"Hmmpf. As long as he does what you brought him here to do, Albus. Does he know that Minerva isn't really ill?"

"Not specifically, although because I had asked him whether he could teach this week even before Minerva supposedly became ill, I am sure he has guessed it is some ruse to get you out of the castle. I doubt very much that he or anyone else would guess that your departure is going to be faked, as well. I hope you don't mind parting with a few locks of hair, my boy. I am sending someone to Mongolia for a few days, posing as you. He will return to England as himself late on Wednesday and wait for my signal to Polyjuice himself and Apparate back to Hogsmeade and return to the school. Then you can reappear, brew the potion, we can treat Minerva, you can begin teaching, and Minerva will recover sufficiently to return to the classroom a day or two later."

"Who is going to Mongolia, Albus?" Severus asked.

Albus hesitated. "Well, Minerva had said that you suggested he teach in your stead. I didn't think that was necessarily appropriate, but I did think that Alastor Moody could believably impersonate you enough to substitute for you in your little trip."

Severus stared, mouth open. "Moody? The man hates me."

"Perhaps, but he seems fairly fond of Minerva. And he is a loyal member of the Order. Of course he does realise that your trip is not to retrieve potion ingredients, or else you would be going yourself. He does not, however, know that she is not genuinely ill. Nor does he know that you are not actually going to be leaving the castle. He doesn't like not knowing the details, but I told him that for Minerva's sake, it was better he not know."

"Hmmpf. Well, I hope he enjoys having two legs. I do not relish the thought of someone walking about in my likeness, Albus. It's disturbing. Why do you think I use so much Shed-Stop Potion on my hair? And to think of Moody . . . well, perhaps he will appreciate having a different set of aches and pains than the ones he has."

"He did want me to reassure him that the Dark Mark would be . . . cosmetic only."

"No need for him to worry. Its magic won't transfer, just its appearance." Severus shook his head in resignation. "All right, Albus, give me a trim. But make sure that any that isn't used is destroyed immediately."

"Good. He's waiting in my office. Would you like to see him off? No? Thought not, but it couldn't hurt to ask!" Albus grinned, then lifted his wand and neatly trimmed a half-inch from Severus's hair; the trimmings floated meekly to a napkin on the table, which Albus carefully folded and put in his pocket.

"I shall leave you two to your own devices for a while. I still have work to do, but if you need me, just call Wilsby, and she can fetch me. I will join you for lunch, I believe."

Minerva kissed him good-bye before he Flooed to his office, Severus standing awkwardly, trying not to notice.

Minerva and Severus spent the morning much as they had spent Sunday. They both read, occasionally talked, or found something to read aloud to the other, then every sixty-five to seventy-five minutes, Severus would act on the imperative. Minerva felt odd about allowing him to anything more than he had done that morning, so Severus satisfied the *Adfectus* by kissing her, holding her in his arms, and fondling her breasts through her robes.

Just before lunch, Severus came over to Minerva where she sat reading a novel and knelt beside her. "Minerva, it is not quite an hour yet, but Albus will return soon. I do not want him to have to see me kissing you as I have."

Minerva agreed completely, particularly given how heated some of his kisses had become, and how fervent his attention to her breasts breasts which should be only for Albus to touch. But Minerva merely nodded and stood. Severus rose and put his arms around her, kissing her mouth as he had done, then trailing kisses down her throat. One hand moved lower and found her rounded buttocks; he squeezed and moaned, then pulled her closer. She could feel his erection pressing into her belly, and his breathing increased as he kneaded her flesh and kissed her pulse point before he moved to her ear.

"Oh, gods, Minerva, I love you. I need you so." He sucked her earlobe, his breath heavy and warm. Minerva felt a tingling shoot to her groin.

She pushed him away. "That's enough, Severus. Enough for now. Lunch will be soon. I need to freshen up."

Minerva turned and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. She flopped down on the bed. How could she do this, carry this out, if every time that she became at all excited, she felt sick and guilty? They hadn't even done very much yet, really. She wanted to talk to Albus about it, but she felt that would be terribly unfair to him. It was clear to her that, despite his claims that he was not bothered by anything she and Severus did, he was bothered on some level. It was triggering a few of his own insecurities about himself, for one. And he was bound to feel uncomfortable about the idea of another man touching her intimately, eventually even having sex with her, even if he understood it and approved of it on an intellectual level. Minerva doubted that Albus would voice this to her, however although he did refer to it obliquely the previous evening when he said it was one thing to give his approval to anything she did even acknowledging it in the abstract and quite another to contemplate each individual activity in detail.

Minerva sighed. Tomorrow. It had to be tomorrow. She just couldn't go through with it quite yet, but she couldn't bear it any longer, either. She wondered whether she should tell Albus, or if it would be kinder to let him know after it was over. Perhaps she could just hint. If he wanted to know, he could ask.

It was with slight reluctance that she forced herself off the bed and back into the sitting room. Severus was at the table, looking through some of the notes they had brought with them from her sitting room. He looked up and smiled when he saw her.

"We might be able to *Oblivate* you afterward, Minerva, if you want. It doesn't interfere with the *Adfectus* as long as it's done after the spell has completely dissipated. Of course, we couldn't erase all of the last few days, that would likely damage your memory, but we could *Oblivate* at least the last few hours, if you would like."

Minerva smiled, "No, thank you, Severus. Not only do I not want that much of my memory erased the prospect of losing even a minute or two to a *Oblivate* makes me shudder but I think that there would still be physical memory of it. And I will remember everything leading up to it. I think I would find it most disturbing not to remember the event itself. But I appreciate your attempt at trying to find something that would help."

Severus had just begun to respond when the fireplace flared green and Albus stepped through.

Without any preamble, Albus said, "Minerva, we have a situation that requires your attention."

"My attention, but, Albus "

"Your niece is here. She is in the infirmary giving Poppy a hard time. She insists that, as a Healer and your niece, she has the right to see you. You know Melina, Minerva. She is not likely to go away quietly. The last thing she told Poppy was that she would have the Ministry look into her practices if she wasn't allowed to see you and evaluate your condition. She was also most upset with me because I had not informed her and she'd had to read about it in the *Daily Prophet* this morning."

"I guess she'll have to see me, then. Severus," Minerva said, turning to the younger wizard, "it is probably best if you stay in your room while she's here. We can at least keep up part of the pretense for her."

Severus nodded and left, and Albus Flooded back to his office. A few minutes later, Melina Flooded through, followed closely by Albus.

"Minerva! What on earth?! Where are we, and why are you here, looking quite well, when you are supposed to be deathly ill in the Hogwarts infirmary?" Melina took her aunt's arms. "It is you, isn't it? You aren't some Polyjuiced replica like that Defence teacher was?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes, Melina, it's me. Do you remember the first time you, Albus, and I ate at the same table? It was at that café in McTavish Street."

Melina knit her brows. "Albus could have told you that tell me what you said when I told you about Brennan."

"I'm sure I told you a good many things, most of them ridiculous. I asked you if you had been fool enough to tell him you were a witch, for one. And I worried that he was too old and would drop dead any second. And I told you to tell your father about him. Does any of that convince you?"

"Yes, but what is going on? Everyone believes you are in quarantine suffering from febrile magical distemper of the spasmodic type. And hundreds of students saw you fall ill on Sunday."

"An act, obviously. I am fine, as you can see. But we would appreciate it if you could corroborate the story. Tell everyone I'm stable but not improving as quickly as I should given my weakened condition after the stunner attack last June, and that's why Severus was dispatched to Mongolia so that he can make a very special potion that should increase my chances of survival. All right? And let Mother know. She's probably having fits."

"She is. It was all I could do to convince her to leave it to me. Well, I don't know why you would want to do this, and I have a feeling I wouldn't want to know, either. Especially given that the notes on that table are all about the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*, and I'm betting it's not you or Albus who has a problem with that."

"You have seen and said too much, Melina, and if you weren't my niece . . . go back now with Albus; let everyone know you've seen me and you have strong hopes for my recovery. And be sure to apologise to Poppy before you leave. She knows less than you do."

After they had left, Minerva knocked on Severus's door. "It's okay, Severus, you can come out now."

"She's gone?" he asked, opening the door.

"Yes. Probably with as many questions as she arrived with, but they're different ones, and she won't be demanding answers for them."

It was another half hour before Albus returned for lunch, by which time Severus was feeling the urge to act on the imperative again, and they left briefly to take care of it. When they returned, Albus was sitting at the table, waiting for them to join him.

"Wilsby has provided us the meal you missed Sunday night, my dear, and which neither Severus nor I could properly appreciate, anticipating what you were going to be enduring."

"Yorkshire pudding! Lovely!"

Lunch was pleasant, but Minerva felt that it was more silent than she would have liked. Of course, she had no expectations of fascinating conversation with Severus, although he had been trying that morning, but Albus seemed preoccupied.

"Is everything all right, Albus?"

"Oh, yes, my dear. Just fine. I need to leave shortly to teach your classes. I think I should attend dinner in the Great Hall, since I have missed lunch and was only there for a few minutes during breakfast. Since both you and Severus are gone, I don't want the staff table to look quite so devoid of senior staff. Horace, of course, is temporarily in charge of Slytherin, and Hagrid is doing his best with the Gryffindors, but the school has been thrown into a bit of chaos with two Heads of House absent. Not to mention that one of them is the Deputy Headmistress. Filius has offered to help me with some of your duties, Minerva, but you do so much . . . I don't know where to begin telling him what to do. I think it would take longer to explain than it would to do it myself."

"Bring some back with you this evening, then. I can do some work from here I'll just charm my writing to look like yours. It's not as though we haven't done that before. And while Severus is supposedly brewing my potion and I'm still recuperating, I will have a lot of time on my hands."

"All right, my dear, but now I must be off. I will see you both this evening after dinner."

When Albus announced his intention to be gone until after dinner, Minerva immediately decided that she and Severus could spend some time together getting more used to each other. Tomorrow was the day, and she would look forward to it.

"Severus, could you give me another massage? I don't know if you'd prefer to use massage oil or the potion you gave me if it's safe to use that."

"Quite safe, Minerva."

"Good. You fetch it from the nightstand in my bedroom, then, and meet me in your bedroom in five minutes."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Minerva entered his bedroom and closed the door. "Wilspy!"

Wilspy popped in. "Yes, Professor Dumbledore's Minerva? You wants something in Professor Snape's bedroom?" she asked with a disapproving look.

"Yes. Two clean sheets extras. Immediately." For all she had defended Wilspy to Severus, she still didn't like the disapproval in her eyes.

Wilspy procured the sheets as requested and left. Minerva stripped off all of her clothes but her knickers, then lay down on top of the bed, arranging one sheet to cover her from the waist up and the other to cover her below the waist. She had just finished when Severus knocked.

"Come in." She looked up to see Severus standing, dumbfounded, in the doorway. He could see her robes draped across a chair.

"I thought you might, if you like, give me a full massage. I think it would help me become more used to your touch."

Severus only nodded and came toward the bed.

"I do have a request of you, though, Severus. I would like you to take off your robes; just leave on your shirt and trousers and roll up your sleeves even your left sleeve. Will you do that for me?"

"If you wish, my love. I will do as you wish." He removed his outer teaching robe, then his shorter under robe.

Minerva saw the braces and belt. She fought the desire to laugh, and when she was sure she wouldn't, she asked, "Severus, why do you wear both a belt and braces? Isn't one or the other sufficient?"

She was very glad she hadn't laughed, since Severus blushed bright red. "I have since sixth-year."

"I see. May I know why?"

"I started wearing trousers every day after some students had turned me upside down, displaying my underwear for a small crowd of students. I had stopped wearing trousers when I came to Hogwarts because I thought that it might make me look more like the pure-bloods and less like the Muggle-borns. Of course, by the seventies, most young wizards were wearing trousers regardless of their origins, but I was insecure about these things. After the experience of having my underwear on display, however, I decided that trousers would be quite practical underneath my robes. But then, well, you were there, you must have seen what they did in the Great Hall at dinner, in front of everyone. And of course they were never punished because no one saw them do it."

Minerva suddenly remembered an event from almost twenty years before: someone had magicked Severus's robes up and his trousers down around his ankles as he was getting up to leave the Great Hall after eating his dinner.

"I knew who did it, Severus, and, although I couldn't officially punish them, I assure you they were not very happy about the lecture they received or the Hogsmeade weekend they lost. James in particular, since he apparently had a date." She had loved those boys, but their penchant for practical jokes sometimes crossed the border into cruelty, and they always singled out a target usually Severus who was not in a position to defend himself. And then when the target tried to exact revenge again, usually Severus there always seemed to be a teacher around to catch him, or the three together created too great a defence, and Severus came out the worse for wear. He was only successful when he used stronger jinxes and hexes than they had, which, of course, made him look like the greater bully. Minerva still didn't know how the enmity had started, and she had no idea if it could have been averted or ended.

"I see why you chose to do that. But you really don't need to wear both a belt and braces today. I mean that both literally and figuratively. Today, with me, one or the other would be sufficient, and in general, I doubt you are in any danger of someone pulling down your pants and pulling your robe up around your ears. Obviously, if you are comfortable this way, dress as you wish, but I think it would be nice if you wore only one or the other whilst we are together. I would feel you trust me."

"All right, Minerva," he replied docilely. "Which do you prefer?"

"I don't know which is more comfortable, but I think I've always found braces more attractive than a belt, for some reason." She had known two wizards who commonly wore braces, and she had been quite fond of them both. "I didn't know that trousers came with both belt loops and buttons for the braces."

"Madam Malkin adds the buttons for me," he said as he pulled off his belt.

"I think you might be more comfortable with your shoes off, as well."

Severus sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes.

"All right. I'm going to roll over onto my stomach. I thought you could first remove the upper sheet and rub my back, then you could replace it and remove the lower sheet and massage my legs."

Severus nodded seriously. She rolled over and felt him remove the sheet. Despite the other sheet covering her, she felt naked in front of him. She swallowed her nervousness and waited for him to begin.

He started by rubbing the warming potion into her shoulders. She could feel herself relaxing under his touch as he continued to massage her back and her arms. He draped the sheet back over her then removed the lower one. She heard his sharp intake of breath.

"You have beautiful legs, Minerva. Very beautiful."

He began massaging her feet, then worked his way up her calves to her thighs. He massaged her thighs much as he had the rest of her body, but she had always been particularly sensitive to the touch of a man's hands on her inner thighs. As if sensing that, Severus paid her thighs special attention, and gradually his movements became gentler as he kneaded the flesh of her inner thighs. Almost without willing to, Minerva allowed her legs to fall apart slightly. His touch proceeded up the inside of her leg, almost to her crotch, when she finally sighed and said, "Severus, I think that is enough for now."

He dutifully covered her with the sheet and stood. "Should I leave now?"

"No, not just yet." Minerva turned over, careful not to dislodge the sheets covering her. "You asked earlier if you could see my scars. I think this provides a good opportunity. Come here, sit beside me again."

Minerva swallowed and took a deep breath, letting it out before slowly rolling back the sheet covering her breasts. It was not her scars that she hadn't wanted to display, but her breasts, yet Severus seemed to be focussed on the scars.

"This one is long it goes on further down."

"Yes, it does." Minerva lowered the sheet all the way to her waist.

Severus reached toward her, then glanced at her face. "May I?" Minerva nodded.

He very gently traced each scar with the tips of his fingers. His voice hoarse, he said, "I am sorry I was not there sooner. I wish I had stopped them . . ." He looked back up at Minerva's face and caught her eye. "I don't suppose you want me to kill Umbridge for you. I thought not and I was just kidding! . . . Mostly," he added, with a quirk of his lips. "May I . . . if it is all right . . . I would like to kiss them."

Albus had kissed them. He had kissed them many times. He said he wished he could kiss them and make it all go away, and she knew he hadn't meant just the scars. But it was just skin. And Severus would remember this. She nodded. "Yes, you may."

Minerva closed her eyes as Severus's lips moved across her chest, up, down, over, and across again, tracing each one from end to end. When he had finished, he lay his head on her bare chest. "You are so beautiful, Minerva. The scars can only accentuate your beauty, especially knowing how you received them. You are brave and noble. Your attackers were cowardly scum. I love you." He kissed her breast as he finished speaking, then kissed it again. When she showed no objection, he raised a hand and began to fondle her breast and carefully play with her nipple as it peaked.

"I know what I said about not being too rough with it, but you don't need to be quite so careful," Minerva whispered.

Severus rolled her nipple between his fingers, and Minerva let out a sharply exhaled breath. He stopped, but she said, "No, that was nice. Quite nice."

He continued, then moved to kiss it. Once he kissed it, he didn't seem to want to leave it; he kissed her nipple again, then licked it. He closed his mouth around her nipple and, eyes closed in bliss, suckled a moment until Minerva pushed him up. "You needn't stop; just try the other one, as well."

He needed no further encouragement, and he moved to the other breast, suckling that one and fondling the other. A few moments later, and Minerva gently pushed him away from her.

"I think that is enough for now. We can do more later. And perhaps you might take off your shirt next time."

He just nodded and stood, the bliss of the satisfied imperative showing in his relaxed features.

"Why don't you wait for me in the sitting room, Severus. I will get dressed and join you shortly."

After that encounter, it shouldn't be too difficult tomorrow to have sex with him. She still hadn't let him touch her centre, but she wanted to wait and reserve that for the day of the actual deed. No point in giving him that kind of access until then. Besides, she would feel as though she were using him if she let him pleasure her in that way too many times before she was ready to agree to intercourse. The imperative would be satisfied, but other than that, she felt he wouldn't get much out of it. She'd be treating him like a gigolo or something.

By the time that Albus had returned that evening with Severus's new sleeping potion, it was almost ten o'clock. Minerva put Severus to bed almost immediately because they had spent so much intensive time together over the last few hours, she only took ten minutes with him before emerging to find Albus. But he wasn't there. There was a note on the table.

"Call me if you need me, my dear. I will be in my suite. Wilsby can fetch me."

"Love,

"Albus"

Hmmpf. In his suite, indeed. Minerva sent Wilsby for him telling the house-elf to inform him that she was not going to bed without him.

Albus came through a few minutes later. "You needed to see me, my dear?"

"I need to sleep with you, Albus, not see you."

"I don't think that is wise."

"I suppose you've cornered the market on wisdom, then," Minerva said crossly.

"No, no," he answered softly. "You know better than anyone that I haven't."

"I'm sorry, Albus, I didn't mean it I just have been looking forward to seeing you all day. We've barely seen each other at all. And while ordinarily that wouldn't make me happy, I could tolerate it, but in this situation, I really need you here." She stopped, hesitating. She was thinking only of herself. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to stay. "Unless you aren't comfortable. If you don't want to, if you can't, that's all right. I understand. This must be very hard for you, too."

"A part of me wants to stay and part of me doesn't, to be completely honest. I had hoped and dreaded that perhaps you might be working toward ending the spell today. I thought perhaps if I left you alone with him tonight . . . you might sleep with Severus."

"No. No, I won't sleep with Severus. Ever. I will spend the night with you or alone. The closest I might come to sleeping with Severus is if he joins us, but given where the imperative is leading him now, I don't think I'd want that, either. So whether you stay or you leave . . . it's up to you, Albus. Whichever you prefer. I can sleep alone if I have to. I would simply prefer not to. And you are the only one I want to sleep with."

"Well, let's go to bed, then." He smiled, put his arm around her, and led her off to sleep.

Severus woke Minerva at four o'clock in the morning. She went with him into the sitting room and sleepily allowed him to kiss her and touch her wherever he wanted to for several minutes. She sent him back off to bed with another dose of potion more out of the desire to go back to bed and go to sleep than because she cared one way or the other what he was doing, she was so tired.

That morning, when Albus was dressing to leave, Minerva walked up behind him and gave him a hug. "I think it is best if you are gone for the day. I'm not sure how things will progress yet, but why don't we plan on your coming back here just before dinner. I will want to see you then, regardless of how things have gone, I am sure."

He turned around and kissed her. "That is fine. I will come by at five o'clock. Until then . . . enjoy your day, my love."

Minerva returned his kiss, then leaned against him. "I will try to. I love you, Albus."

"I love you, too."

After Albus had left, Minerva asked Severus if he wanted any breakfast. Neither felt particularly hungry Minerva was nervous and Severus was more deeply in the thrall of

the *Adfectus*, so Minerva drank a few cups of tea and Severus had his usual coffee.

Minerva stood from the table and took Severus's hand, leading him to his bedroom. She closed the door and placed an *Imperturbable* on it. She turned to face Severus.

"If you'd like, you can undress me. And yourself. Um, gradually, I think."

Severus just stood there for a moment, then he stepped toward her, took her in his arms, and kissed her; he kissed her just as she had shown him she liked. As he kissed her, he began unbuttoning the back of her dress, then pushed it down. He stepped back slightly and sighed at the sight of her breasts, before stepping toward her and lowering her to the bed. He licked, kissed and sucked her skin from her throat to her breasts, then began to suckle at her right breast whilst fondling her left.

"Your shirt, now, Severus," Minerva whispered.

The dazed wizard sat up, lowered his braces, and removed his shirt, heedless of the mark on his arm. He embraced Minerva, holding her close and relishing the feel of her skin against his own.

"Mmm. I love you, Minerva, I love you so much. So much."

Minerva, eyes closed, allowed herself to enjoy the sensation of his body moving against hers, the feel of his lips moving over her throat then down to her breasts. His breathing was rapid, and she could feel his heart pounding as he moved further down and began to kiss her stomach and slide her skirts from her body, shoving them to the floor.

Minerva allowed Severus the freedom of her body, to touch and explore it with his fingers and his mouth as he undressed her. He lay back next to her and sighed after she finally pushed him away.

"I think a brief break, then I think it's time for you to finish undressing." Minerva pulled a sheet over her.

"May I just hold you, please?"

Minerva scooted over against him and let him hold her until she noticed that he was beginning to tremble. The imperative was calling more strongly after the access she had given him. Minerva moved up and kissed him, calming the spell with her mouth and her body. Severus's arms went around her, and he rolled her over, still kissing her. As the imperative and instinct took over, he reached between her legs and, for the first time, touched her centre. He moaned and tears streamed down his face as his fingers stroked her soft flesh. Whether it was his touch, his moan, or his emotion that did it, Minerva didn't know, but she began to grow warm and wet, feeling a tingling in her clit and the desire for something to enter her.

"Your fingers, Severus," she whispered, breaking off the kiss for a moment. "Pleasure me with your fingers. More. Inside." She reached between them and showed him what she meant, taking his hand and urging two of his fingers to enter her. As Severus, smiling, began to thrust his fingers into her as fast as he could, Minerva let out a deep sigh, and arched her back to meet them. "Mm," she said. She was so close, so close, but it was just frustrating . . . She pulled back from him and pushed his hand away gently. "That was very good, Severus. Very good. But enough for now."

She didn't think that the spell required her to orgasm, although, according to certain texts, it did require her to be "satisfied" with her partner's performance, whatever that meant. Minerva lay there next to Severus and rested. He seemed quite happy and was amusing himself by playing with one of her nipples.

"I think we'll skip lunch, if that's all right with you, Severus."

"Mmm. That's fine, Minerva. Whatever you like."

"I suppose I would like you to take off your trousers now. Just the trousers, though. And your socks, if you want." She didn't think she could deal with a fully naked Severus Snape yet.

Severus stood. The *Adfectus* was so in control of his actions that he made no comments about his ugliness or how she would loathe his touch. He simply stripped off his trousers and tossed them on a chair before sitting and removing his socks.

He rejoined her by moving aside her sheet and beginning to kiss her legs. His hand found its way to her clit again, and he began the exercise of stroking it before moving up to kiss her stomach. He lay beside her.

"Minerva," he whispered as he still fingered her wetness, "would you like me to kiss you . . . down there? I will if you wish."

Minerva opened her eyes and looked at him. She caressed his cheek. "No . . . it is a nice thing, you know, Severus, but I think I would rather you didn't. I think that someday . . . someday you should find another witch who might enjoy that and who you would enjoy it with. You probably would not dislike it now . . . and I would even likely get some pleasure out of it. But it is one of the most intimate things that I think two people can do with each other, and I would prefer that when this is over, I don't have that memory, even if the activity itself might be pleasant at the moment. Do you understand?"

"Not completely. But I only want to do what will make you happy, my love." As he spoke, his fingers had found their way into her again, but he was just wiggling them around in a rather random manner.

"Severus there may be women who enjoy that particular touch, but it doesn't do anything for me." Indeed, she was beginning to get dry. They would need to take a real break soon. Perhaps some tea and scones. Or perhaps sandwiches. Whilst Minerva was considering what to have for tea, Severus blushed and removed his fingers, lying down on his back beside her.

Severus wiped his fingers discreetly on the sheet. What had he been doing wrong? She liked to have him touch her there . . . there must be different ways of doing it. He wanted her to have an orgasm. It wasn't just pride. He knew she could climax . . . he had heard her. And he wanted to bring her the greatest pleasure he could. He wanted to show her he loved her truly. If only she would let him kiss her down there . . . but then, he didn't know what he was doing. He'd probably do it wrong. He sighed.

"What's wrong, Severus? I hope you weren't hurt by what I said about certain activities being too intimate."

"No, not really. I just don't think I can please you, Minerva . . ." Tears welled in his eyes.

"You can, of course you can. Let's put on our dressing gowns and get Wilsby to bring us something to eat. She'll be scandalised, but we can't do anything about that."

After a scandalised and disapproving house-elf had provided them with sustenance, Severus and Minerva returned to the bedroom. Minerva removed her dressing gown and stood naked in front of him, then she walked over to him and took off his robe, as well.

"I think I might enjoy this more if I were to do something other than just lie there and have you bring me pleasure, Severus."

Lying down on the bed with him, she touched his chest, stroking it and brushing her palm across his nipples. When she was certain he was comfortable with her touch, she braced herself internally and reached for the waistband of his boxers.

"Minerva, you don't need to do that. We can wait. We can wait until just before we need to have it out," Severus said, holding onto the waistband.

"I don't think I want to wait, Severus, but I don't want to rush you, either. Is there a reason that you don't want to remove them, or is it just that you don't think I want them off?"

"Um, I'm not sure. But if you don't want to wait . . . it's all right. I'll help you."

His penis was long and darkly swollen. Minerva noticed immediately that he was circumcised. She had never been with a circumcised wizard before. Probably because they had all been born well before Severus had been . . . he may also have been born in a Muggle hospital. She believed that some Muggles, regardless of religion, believed in circumcising all male babies. Minerva reached out a tentative finger to touch the head of his cock. It just felt like skin. More or less like the rest of his cock, she thought, as she drew her finger down from his head to the base of his shaft. His cock twitched. The head was not as soft as if he were uncircumcised in her limited experience, anyway. Minerva's mind turned to what Severus had revealed to her the previous morning about his *own* limited experience. She wondered whether it was different to go down on a circumcised penis. Probably. She didn't want to find out through first-hand experience, though.

"Minerva," Severus rasped, "I hope you're not going to . . . you're not thinking about . . . I don't want you to do it."

"What?" Minerva asked, shaken out of her reverie by Severus's voice.

"It's just . . . what you said about my kissing you down there, and doing other things . . . it's what the other women do. I don't want you to."

"All right, Severus. Although just a kiss wouldn't be the same thing as a real blow job." Surprising herself, and before Severus could stop her, she swooped down and planted one quick kiss on the shaft of his cock before lying back.

"You see, I told you you were not disgusting and ugly, Severus." She pulled him to her and kissed him softly. She took his penis in her hand, but she had barely stroked three times when she felt him start to pull away, moaning, then on the fourth stroke, she felt his cock move; she gently took his balls in her other hand as they contracted and he spurted his cum everywhere her hands, his stomach, her stomach, the bed.

"Oh, gods," Severus moaned. "Oh, Minerva, I am sorry . . . I am so sorry." He rolled over, turning away from her.

My, that was quick. But surely the spell wasn't satisfied. For one thing, he had come because she was touching him; he had not been acting on his love for her. For another, it seemed pretty clear that intercourse was required, although there was one documented case in which the spell's requirement was fulfilled by a couple fellating each other mutually. But Minerva was fairly sure this wasn't such a case.

She wiped her right hand on the sheet then Summoned her wand. Minerva quickly cleaned up herself and the sheets.

"Turn over, Severus, let me clean you up, dear."

Severus shook his head.

"It's all right, Severus. Really. That sort of thing happens all of the time. And since you should recover quickly, especially under the *Adfectus*, I am sure you'll soon be quite ready for another go. I just wish I had been able to give you greater pleasure, that's all."

"You did," came the croaked reply. "It was just too much. I didn't expect it. I didn't think you would really want to touch me. And I was already very . . . stimulated from being here with you, lying so close to you naked. I feel like a teenager."

"Well, there are advantages to youth. Come, now, turn around. I'll cast a quick spell and we'll be ready for more."

Severus rolled over and let Minerva cast a cleansing charm on him and the sheets on the other side of him where he had dripped.

She smiled. "Can be quite a messy activity, can't it? Now, give me a kiss and touch me as you would like."

Severus followed her suggestion, the imperative offering him little choice. Soon, he was kissing her, moving between her mouth and her nipples, fondling her breasts, and stroking a finger against her clit. Minerva began to feel more aroused and shifted her pelvis, attempting to encourage him to enter her with his fingers. She arched her back, and still he only rubbed her clit and her lips.

"Oh, gods," she said with some frustration, "Severus, would you please just . . . just more, okay? In me. Inside." She felt she was being impatient with him, but with the time it could take for the spell to dissipate entirely, this could still take hours.

Apparently Severus took no offense, and began to thrust his finger into her vagina. Again, Minerva felt on the brink of orgasm, but it just wouldn't come. She wanted to swear, but she knew that Severus was doing the best he could. It wasn't really his fault. She was trying to engage fully in this process, but she knew that there was a part of her that wouldn't allow her to let go completely. Finally, she stopped him again. "Mmm, that was very nice, Severus. But now I was wondering whether there was something you would enjoy. Something you would like me to do for you."

Severus looked at her a moment. "Well, there is one thing. Bella . . . Bella was the other witch I mentioned yesterday. Bella used to like to . . . hurt me. Just a little," he added when he saw Minerva's expression of alarm.

"I am *not* going to hurt you, Severus Snape." Her temper was beginning to flare.

"Oh, I don't want you to . . . not exactly. It wouldn't hurt. I just wanted to let you know what she liked to do, so you would understand . . . she never asked me what I would like or what I would enjoy. And sometimes she wouldn't even stop like she had said she would."

Minerva's arousal completely vanished. She was sure that Severus had been quite young when Bella had played with him and exploited him as she had. And she was six or seven years older than he. That certainly had not contributed toward his emotional health.

"I am sorry to hear that, Severus. But I really would like to do something you might enjoy."

"You might think it's strange."

"Well, let me decide. If it won't hurt either of us." And isn't too intimate, Minerva thought. "I don't think 'strange' necessarily means 'bad.'"

"Well, I'd like to lie on my stomach." He hesitated and Minerva nodded at him. "And if you could sit on me. On my shoulders, actually. And, um, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like it if you rubbed my lower back down to my legs."

"You want me to rub your buttocks, you mean?" asked Minerva.

Severus blushed and nodded.

"Well, that part is not strange. It probably feels pretty good to most people. And you want me to sit on your shoulders . . . how?"

"I'll show you, if you want to do it," Severus said softly, as though he couldn't believe Minerva would comply with his odd request.

Severus assured her he didn't want her to put her knickers on. He wanted to feel her. So she sat straddling his back, legs hooked under his shoulders, facing his feet, and she began to rub his buttocks. They were smooth, rounded, and muscular, with fewer scars than his back. As Minerva massaged him, she began to slide back and forth on his back. Hmm, this was rather nice. She felt guilty, as though she was using him as a tool for her pleasure, but she almost couldn't help but slide her wet clit back and forth on his back as she massaged him from his lower back to his legs and back up again. Soon, she was breathing more heavily than she had when he had been trying to pleasure her with his fingers. She wasn't going to come, but she was wet again. Perhaps it was time to try to fulfill the final imperative.

She reached between his legs as she massaged him, finding his sac and teasing it with just the tips of her fingers. Yes, now would be a good time to try. Minerva worked her way back around to lie beside Severus. It was more difficult getting out of that position than it had been to get into it.

"Severus, I enjoyed that; did you?"

He turned to look at her. His eyes were bright and his face relaxed. "It was one of the most wonderful things . . ." He kissed her. "I love you, Minerva. I will love you forever, even if you revile me, I shall continue to love you. Even if you raise your wand to kill me, I shall love you."

"I will not revile you, Severus, and to think I would ever try to kill you is absurd. Kiss me again and just show me your love."

He did kiss her. And she urged him to roll over on top of her. The imperative was strong and she barely expressed her desire for him to enter her when he tried, using one hand to guide himself. He went in and popped out immediately. He broke off the kiss to try again. He stroked in her twice then came out, the head of his cock hitting against her clit as he tried to find her entrance again.

"Damn," he said, as he again popped out.

Minerva thought he was just trying the wrong angle, but this was becoming a little frustrating. She didn't think it was his cock. It wasn't quite as big around as Albus's, but it wasn't what she would have called small, either. And it was at least as long. It had to be the angle.

She Summoned a pillow and placed it under her hips, then she guided him into her. Better.

"All right, Severus, start slowly until you feel where you are, where I am, and the angle of my vagina, then you can speed up as much as you like."

Severus took her advice and began to slowly thrust in and out of her. She saw the concentration in his face. He began to speed up. Minerva closed her eyes, concentrating only on that sensation of hard cock pumping in and out of her. Her tingling and warmth grew, and finally a small explosion erupted in her genitals and sent a wave of pleasure through her. Now she encouraged him.

"That's good, Severus, that's good. Come for me, Severus, come, come." She watched his face as it first went slightly blank, then his eyes closed tightly and he gritted his teeth as he came with a grunt, pushing into her, then collapsing.

Minerva gently rolled him off of her. She Summoned her wand and cleaned them both up.

"Oh, gods, Minerva . . . that was absolutely incredible."

"It was," she agreed. Incredible that they had done it at all, for one thing. But she was glad he thought it was that good. Hopefully that meant that ~~the~~*Adfectus* was gone. "How do you feel now, Severus?"

"Mmm. Sleepy, but good. I think I feel better than I ever have in my entire life. You are just the most amazing witch in the world. No, you are the most amazing woman ever." He turned and put his arm around her. "I think I really do love you, Minerva. But I suppose we now leave this little room, out of time and out of place, and return to reality."

"You can't leave quite yet, Severus. You know there's the dissipation period. Probably an hour or two. Since you feel sleepy, why don't we take a nap. Maybe when you wake up, the spell will be completely gone."

"Wise woman," he said, kissing the side of her head before closing his eyes and drifting into an undrugged sleep.

An hour and a half later, Minerva stretched and looked at Severus, who was stirring beside her.

"Are you awake, sleepyhead?" she asked.

"What the fuck?! Oh, crap." Severus pushed away from her. He stared at her. "Why ~~are~~*you* here?"

Minerva looked at him, puzzled. Amnesia was not supposed to be a side-effect of the spell. "Don't you remember, Severus you were hit by the ~~the~~*Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*, and I was the object of your affection, so to speak."

"Of course I remember that, woman! I am not *an idiot*. What I meant was, what are you *still* doing here?"

Minerva sat up and pulled the sheet around her. "For your information, if either of us has a greater right to be in this room, it is I, and not you, for a number of reasons. And if you don't remember this, I will tell you: we just had sex so that you could be freed from that curse. I spent the last five days with you, leading up to it."

"I'm sure that was a barrel of laughs for you. Did you and Albus get quite a chuckle out of the greasy git laying his heart out before you? I don't love you; I never did. That spell is absolute crap. You just happened to be the first mature witch I laid eyes on. That's all. I certainly wouldn't have chosen to be with *you*, of all people."

Minerva turned from him, lying down. "Get the hell out of my sight, Severus."

"You see! I told you that you would hate me when it was over, didn't I? But ~~then~~*the noble* Gryffindor thinks one good fuck and she'll have a pet Slytherin."

Minerva sat up, turned around and, in one fluid movement, slapped Severus hard across the face. "I know why you're doing this, Severus, but that doesn't mean I have to stand for it."

"You see you wasted your goods on a bastard. Well, that was your choice. Not mine. I would have died. You should have let me."

"All right, if you won't go, I will." Minerva Summoned her dressing gown and pulled it around her without putting it on. She walked with as much dignity as she could muster into the bathroom and closed the door, casting an Imperturbable before she began to cry. She knew he was a bastard, and she thought he might be a bit more cold and formal with her now that they had done this, but she never expected him to be so nasty so soon, and not about what she had done for him.

As she ran a shower and stepped in, she heard a knock on the door. *AColloportus* from her wand squelched a seal around the door. She would come out in her own good time.

Outside the door, Severus, dressed only in his unbuttoned white shirt and his boxers, leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. What had possessed him to say such things? Every one of them untrue. He scrunched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. He would not let her leave without him apologising. And she had to come out sometime. She couldn't Apparate anywhere.

It was a long twenty minutes before the door opened and Minerva, wrapped in her dressing gown, stepped out. She looked down at Severus and stepped over his legs as she went to retrieve her robes. "You're still here."

"Yes."

"I will dress in the bathroom, then."

"Please don't."

"Well, I'm not going to dress in front of you."

"That's not what I meant. I meant . . . I'm sorry. I don't know why I said those things. I am a bastard, but *dam* ashamed of myself," he whispered.

Minerva stood and looked at him a moment. Then she sat beside him and leaned against the wall. "I suppose we could look at it as a bizarre side effect of the spell. What happens when true love mixes with self-loathing."

Severus bowed his head, his hair curtaining his features. "I will never tell you this again, in all likelihood, Minerva, and I'm sure you grew sick of hearing it over the last few days, but I need to tell you now, when I am more or less myself: you are a wonderful witch, an admirable human being, and an example to anyone who meets you, and I love you. I always will. Anywhere I am, whatever I do." He turned to look at her and he smirked slightly. "Even if you revile me, I will love you. And I am sorry for every hurt I ever have or ever will cause you."

Minerva blinked back tears. "Thank you, Severus. Thank you." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Don't expect many of those but if you need to talk to someone, and not just about Quidditch and dunderheads, you know you can come to me. I am good at keeping confidences for friends."

"I will remember that. I may not take you up on it. But I will remember it and appreciate it. Now you go get dressed. I'll probably be gone by the time you leave. You and Albus can finally spend some time together without me interrupting you. And I am glad of that, myself." He reached out a tentative hand and touched her hair, which was still down from her shower. "He is a very lucky man."

"I will see you in a few days, then, when I am supposedly released from the infirmary."

Severus nodded and stood before going to gather his clothes, rummaging through the pile on his dresser to find fresh underwear. Minerva rose and brought her robes with her into the bathroom.

The next time they saw each other, it would be in public, and they would be in their old and familiar roles.

Next: Severus meets with Albus to arrange his "return" from Mongolia; Minerva deals with Albus; and Severus returns to the place where it all began and encounters . . . I'll let you guess who!

If you enjoyed this, check out my long Minerva and Albus story, *Resolving a Misunderstanding*. Although it starts out simply, the plot quickly becomes broader and more complex.

An Act of Love was a third-place winner in the Potter Place Winter 2007 Prompt Challenge!



Eleven: Aftermath

Chapter 11 of 16

The end to this story has grown into a few more chapters and an epilogue. So here is the first of the final set of chapters. Severus has a tense conversation with Albus, and Albus and Minerva deal with the aftermath of the *Adfectus*.



Chapter Eleven: Aftermath

Severus dressed quickly, and he unceremoniously swept the clothing from the dresser into his bag, then took his one extra robe from the wardrobe, rolled it up, and stuffed it in. He grabbed his dressing gown and pyjamas and crammed them into one end of the bag. The two books of poetry sitting on the night stand caught his eye. They had been something of his father's, probably from school. They had spent the last decade and half sitting, gathering dust, in the corner of the bottom shelf of one of his bookcases. He hesitated a moment, but then his hand darted out and added them to his bag. The bag wouldn't close, but Severus took his wand and shrunk the contents enough so that he could pull the zip shut.

Severus glanced at the fireplace. He could Floo to his quarters from here, he supposed, but he needed to see Albus and let him know that Moody could Apparate to Hogsmeade and walk up to the castle so that he could be seen returning from Mongolia. He would use the sitting room fireplace to Floo to the Headmaster's office. The thought of seeing Albus created a nervous knot in his stomach. He had no clear idea what to say or to do when he saw him again. He certainly would not make the mistake he had made with Minerva. He was thankful that Minerva was the forgiving sort. He had been shocked when he awoke, feeling his normal, miserable self, and the memory of the past five days had rushed into his consciousness. He hadn't known what to say, so he had reacted on instinct or habit cultivated over years. He vowed to himself that, when he first saw Albus again, if he didn't know what to say, he wouldn't say anything at all or he would at least admit that he had nothing to say. It had been a bizarre

situation; Albus must surely recognise how difficult it would be for Severus to know how to react.

But how would Albus react? He had been kind, patient, and even Stoic, but Severus had no doubt that he had been very unhappy with the situation. Expressing that unhappiness would not have helped anything, though, and would simply have made things more difficult for Minerva. And given the state that Severus had been in, it would have been pissing in the wind to have tried to talk to him. Albus was likely quite angry with him; he probably had been angry ever since he had viewed the Pensieve memory and realised that Severus had allowed the argument to escalate without doing anything to stop it. Which then led to Severus spending the last five days touching, kissing, and uttering endearments to Albus's lover of several decades. Albus had said Minerva was his "beloved"; he surely was not pleased to have to share her, even if only temporarily. Severus decided that he could not expect a warm greeting from the old wizard. He should brace himself for a severe tongue-lashing.

Severus picked up his bag and stepped into the sitting room to Floo to the Headmaster's office, but he immediately saw that there was no need. The Headmaster was sitting in an armchair, smoking a pipe, a book open but unread on his lap.

"Professor Dumbledore. Albus . . . I was just coming to find you, sir," Severus said stiffly.

Albus looked at him for a moment, then took the pipe from his mouth. "Have a seat, Severus," he said quietly.

Severus perched on the edge of the sofa across from the older wizard. He remembered his resolve not to say anything if he didn't know what to say. And so he didn't.

The two wizards sat, neither of them speaking, for a few minutes, then Albus broke the silence. "I assume from your appearance that the *Adfectus* is gone."

Severus nodded.

"And how is my wife doing?"

A wave of shock passed over Severus. Not his paramour. Not just his lover. And not only his beloved. His *wife*. He should have known. "Your *wife*?" Severus said faintly, barely able to find his voice.

"Mmm. Minerva," Albus said. "How is she?"

"Dressing. She has showered, I believe. She shouldn't be long. I told her I would be leaving, and she went back into the bathroom. She is fine, I think . . ." He was still thinking of the words, "my wife." What had he *done*?

"*Fine*? You *think*?" asked Albus sharply.

"Um, she seems well," he said, still in shock. "She said she'd see me later, after her supposed illness was over." What did the man want to know?

Albus sat and looked at him, then looked down and fiddled with his pipe. "But was she all right during, I mean . . . and after?"

Severus thought a moment. Truth would be best. And some kindness. And tact. The last would not be too difficult, and a good Slytherin knew that telling the truth was always best. It was what you chose to say and not to say that mattered. It was the kindness that might pose a problem. How would Minerva want him to handle it? Considering that would show him how to be kind.

"She was very kind during . . . considerate . . . and patient. She was Minerva. And after, she stayed while the spell dissipated. I slept some. When I woke up, I was confused and distressed. She was very patient with me." Severus paused, looking for a reaction from Albus. "If you are wondering about her physically, she is fine. I didn't hurt her . . . I wouldn't have." Severus swallowed. "Why didn't you tell me that she is your wife, Albus?"

"It was sufficiently complicated, and your knowing would have changed nothing about the spell. It only would have made it more difficult for you. And we generally do not tell anyone, even those who know that we are together. Partly because I believe it is safer for Minerva that way. It also helps us to maintain some privacy." Albus spoke slowly and deliberately; uncharacteristically, he looked away from Severus as he spoke, seeming to address his remarks to the guest room door.

"I see . . ." Severus's unease was becoming irritation and rapidly approaching resentment and anger. "So you tell me now . . . why? *Why*? To make me feel worse than I already do? You have succeeded, if that was your intent, Albus." Severus shoved back into his seat and looked away from Albus. A lump formed in his throat and a knot in his stomach. It really shouldn't make a difference to him. It really shouldn't. But now he felt as though he had violated Minerva in a way that he hadn't felt before. She hadn't told him, and she no doubt believed he would never know. "Or is it because you feel the need to express your claim to her? I know very well that she is not mine and that she belongs to you."

"I don't know why I said it. Perhaps, as you say, to make clear that she is not available . . . although I know, intellectually, that is unnecessary. I don't believe I said it to hurt you, though, Severus. I hadn't even planned to phrase it that way." Albus sighed. "I am sorry if I did hurt you, though."

"No, I suppose you didn't do that intentionally. But subconsciously . . . you never have referred to her that way before, after all," Severus said, grimacing as the words "my wife" went through his head again.

"It is best not to develop that habit; I would not want to slip in public, after all," Albus explained quietly.

Severus shook his head and struggled for words. "You were willing to share her with me."

"No." Albus heaved a sigh. "No, Severus, Minerva is not mine to share. Not that way. She shared herself. As she shares herself with me."

"I doubt that. Not that she shared herself, Albus, but that there is any comparison between her relationship with you and what it was that she did for me to save my life."

Albus looked at him. "She does care for you, Severus," he said softly.

"Hmmpf." He shook his head. "Your *wife*. Well, this makes things even more complicated now, doesn't it?" Severus glanced at the bedroom door. "Our plans will need to change, Albus. You must now see the sense in it."

"No, I do not. We will proceed as we have. We will look at all the options. In the end, it may be that Fate presents us with the option we must take, no matter our plans. We should not speak of this here and now, however."

"We will speak of it, though, Albus."

"I have no doubt we will." Albus looked down at his pipe and banished it, then waved his hand to rid the room of the residual scent of tobacco. "Do you think she wants to see me?" he asked.

"Minerva? Of course she does. She just needed some time to get dressed and . . . to make the transition."

"I suppose we should go up to my office, then," Albus said with a sigh. "I will contact Moody. Moody will arrive in my office as you; you can then be seen leaving it as yourself. I'll have Moody Floo back to London from my office."

"That sounds fine, but I think that Minerva will want to see you. She can't leave here yet. You should stay."

"Mm. I will return when we are done."

Albus stood stiffly, pushing up on the armrest with his left hand. He went over to the table, where some of their research still sat, and found a blank piece of parchment to leave a note.

"Albus I think you should stay. I can wait indefinitely in my rooms. No one will be looking for me there. There's no hurry," Severus said firmly.

"If you supposedly brew the potion tomorrow, you will be able to return to teaching on Friday. I would rather you not wait indefinitely, Severus."

"Just an hour or two, then. Wait for Minerva to come out. Or I can leave, and you can go in and see her."

Albus twitched slightly. "I think I'd rather not go in, Severus. I will leave her a note. It won't take us long. Moody is only at Grimmauld Place. He just has to step outside and Apparate here. And Minerva," he said, looking at the door, "probably needs her privacy now."

Severus bowed his head in reluctant acquiescence and followed Albus through the Floo to the Headmaster's office.

Less than a minute after Severus and Albus left, Minerva opened the door to the sitting room. It was just past five o'clock. Albus had said he would be here at five. She looked in their bedroom. Not there, either. He must have been in his office when Severus left; they were probably arranging his return to the school. That couldn't take long, although he might want to talk to Severus about the entire incident. She hoped he wouldn't be too hard on him. Severus had learned a few lessons from this, she was sure, and even if he forgot most of them, she did believe that he would be quicker to intervene the next time he saw students with their wands drawn and would not give them the opportunity to cast a spell.

Minerva moved to the table to gather up the parchments. She had an idea to publish an anonymous account of this at some point after the war was over, and she wanted to keep the parchments in order. Of course, to protect them all, she would have to alter a few of the details in order to keep their identities secret.

Albus's note stood apart from the other parchments. Minerva picked it up and read it.

"My dearest,

"I arrived slightly early and encountered Severus. We have gone to my office to make arrangements. I will ask Wilsby to bring you your dinner, as you are no doubt hungry. I will be along later after I have taken care of a few things, so do not wait for me.

"Severus tells me that you are fine. I am glad the spell has finally run its course.

"Love,

"A."

Minerva was hungry, but she didn't particularly want to eat alone. Dinner hadn't arrived yet, anyway, so she finished pulling the parchments together into a neat stack. Hermione Granger's letter caught her eye. It wasn't really research . . . and it was unlikely that Severus would want it. Minerva removed the letter from the stack. He probably would not want it, especially as it was a reminder of this largely regrettable episode in his life, but she would keep it for him in case he did. Offer it to him, anyway. She charmed it to read as a list of common potions ingredients.

Minerva Transfigured a scrap of parchment into a ribbon and tied the research together in a neat bundle. Just as she was putting the parchments with her things in the bedroom, she heard the tell-tale sounds of dinner arriving. Minerva quickly returned to the sitting room.

"Wilsby, I see you brought dinner . . . but there's only one serving." Albus had said not to wait for him, but when he'd said he'd be along later, she presumed he would be eating here.

"Professor Dumbledore said to bring you dinner. Professor Snape is with Professor Dumbledore, not here anymore. No dinner for Professor Snape."

"But Albus . . ."

"Professor Dumbledore not saying he's not eating in the Great Hall this evening."

"Oh." Minerva's heart fell. She swallowed. "Thank you, Wilsby. That will be all."

The house-elf winked out. Minerva examined the dinner. Typical Wednesday evening fare. Nothing appealed to her, and her hunger seemed to have left with Wilsby. He probably just had to look in at the Great Hall to keep up appearances, especially as he was so often absent. After all, even though she had asked that he return at five, there was no reason for any of them to have known that the spell would have been dissipated by then. He had probably planned on eating in the Great Hall. And when he got here, Severus was just leaving, purely coincidentally. It made sense for them to have left together. He would probably rejoin her for dessert. In the meantime, she would change her clothes. It hadn't occurred to her to bring another set of robes with her that morning. She had not even thought she'd be taking a shower in the small bathroom off the guest room.

Minerva called Wilsby and asked her to bring her favourite emerald green robes and the jewellery that she always wore with it. The robes had a deep v-neck, and she rarely wore them during the school year. After Severus had left, she had taken another shower and then put her hair up in a fancy chignon, rather than her plain bun or an ordinary chignon, so she left her hair as it was and just changed clothes and put on the gold and emerald necklace.

When she returned to the sitting room, she still wasn't hungry. It wasn't even six o'clock, though. She would just wait to eat until Albus arrived. Even if he'd eaten dinner, he'd keep her company and probably even join her for dessert. A nice dessert something better than the plate of biscuits that had accompanied her meal.

"Wilsby!" Minerva called. Wilsby Apparated to her side in just moments. "Wilsby, when Albus arrives, I'd like you to bring us a nice dessert to share. Perhaps a G noise with chocolate icing and whipped cream." A rather rich dessert, but one they both liked. And after all they had been through . . . "And bring a bottle of cognac." Minerva smiled at the house-elf. "Finally, a reason to celebrate, Wilsby."

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore's Minerva. When do you want me to bring the dessert?"

"Oh, when he gets here would be fine. If I haven't eaten dinner, yet, it will keep. Or perhaps I'll be a bit bold and skip dinner and just eat the cake." Minerva grinned.

"Professor Dumbledore's Minerva should eat dinner!" Wilsby scolded.

"I'll be fine, Wilsby. I just want to wait for Albus. I'm not very hungry yet, anyway."

Minerva settled down on the sofa with a book. She tried to concentrate on reading, but she found herself repeatedly looking over to the fireplace in anticipation of Albus's return. She finally gave up trying to read and put the book down. Minerva didn't particularly want to think right then; if she did, either she would think about the events of the past five days, and she was sick to death of that, or else she would wonder where Albus was, why he hadn't returned yet, and whether there was anything wrong.

Minerva stood and paced, trying not to worry about why Albus hadn't appeared yet. Finally, at seven-thirty, Minerva called Wilsby.

"Wilsby, if Albus isn't with anyone, could you ask him to come see me, please?" She was beginning to worry that what was wrong had nothing to do with the school or their ruse, but with his own discomfort at seeing her after she had been with Severus. The longer he waited, the more uncomfortable it would be for him. "And wait to bring the G noise until I call for it."

Less than two minutes later, Albus stepped from the fireplace. "Wilsby said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I've been waiting for a while, and I finally called for you because I was worried." Minerva stepped toward him, reaching out to touch his arm. "I didn't know whether there was a problem with Moody or if you perhaps didn't want to see me . . ."

"No, the change went smoothly. Moody made it to the office by five-thirty, so Severus and I were able to go to dinner together. I made an announcement that Severus would be brewing your potion tomorrow and would return to teaching on Friday. He and Remus, to my surprise, actually sat next to each other and conversed quite civilly. About nothing of consequence, but I thought it was progress. I had not expected that of Severus; once the *Adfectus* was gone, I assumed he would be unhappy that Remus had substituted for him."

Well, he was answering her question . . . sort of. But he wasn't saying anything of importance to either of them. She didn't care whether Snape and Lupin had hexed each other or had gone off together for a buggler. All she wanted to know was whether Albus had wanted to see her or not. When she'd asked if he would still want her after she done it with Severus, he had told her he would. But there had to be a problem, one that was not school-related, that had kept him from joining her sooner.

Minerva sighed inwardly. She was so emotionally exhausted after the last five days; she knew that Albus must be, too, in his own way, but she wished he had been more open with her about whatever bothered him before now, rather than waiting. For she was now sure that was what he had done, despite his protestations. He probably hadn't even thought about the fact that he was bottling it up. Compartmentalising his emotions when he thought they might interfere with his work or his relationships was almost as much of a habit with Albus as Severus's knee-jerk nastiness was for him, but Minerva had thought that they had long since got past it when it came to their own relationship. But this had been an unusually stressful event. And he had wanted to protect her, as well. She never should have assumed he was doing as well as he appeared to be, but she'd had so much to deal with herself, between her own feelings and Severus's, in addition to having to be available to Severus every hour or so to moon over.

"Albus," she said, taking his arm gently, "let's go sit." They went over to the couch, Minerva carefully sitting on his left so she could take his hand. "Well, I'm glad there was no problem with Moody, but you didn't answer the second half of my question."

"What was that?" Albus asked, eyebrows raised.

Minerva blinked. Perhaps that *had* been it, then. He hadn't wanted to see her. For whatever reason. Well, whatever that reason was, she wasn't going to ignore it. She swallowed, not knowing if she really wanted to know his answer anymore, but knowing that she had to. "I said I was worried because I didn't know whether there was a problem with Moody or if you hadn't wanted to see me."

"Why wouldn't I want to see you?"

"I can think of several reasons, but I only want to know if you didn't . . . or if something else kept you away. I came out just after five o'clock, after my shower, hoping you would be here. I did find your note, of course . . . I knew you had been here, but your note didn't say very much and then Wilsby delivered only one dinner . . . I was worried."

"I told you to go ahead with dinner. I didn't expect to be back for it." Albus paused. "Severus said you had taken a shower already . . . Severus had been out here talking to me for several minutes. I thought you might be putting off coming out here to see me, Minerva. We left a minute or two after five. You asked me to come . . . and I said I would be here at five. I thought perhaps . . . you needed your privacy."

"You did? Well, I *had* taken a shower. I took another one. And I came out only a few minutes past five, myself; we must have just missed each other. I was not putting off seeing you. I was disappointed you weren't here." Minerva bit back the rest of her comment about her disappointment that he didn't seem to care to share dinner with her, her first meal in freedom since she had eaten lunch on Friday. She felt as though she had been released from bondage; she had wanted to celebrate with Albus. Instead, she'd gotten a single serving of mashed potatoes, green beans, and sliced turkey with pumpkin juice and plain wheat biscuits.

"I said I would be along later, to eat without me."

"I know." Minerva was quiet. She was torn between her own hurt and her desire to make sure that Albus was all right. "So, it was busy, then, dinner?"

"Yes, fairly. I think the students were pleased that Severus was back not happy to see him, but pleased that your potion was going to be prepared tomorrow. They miss you."

Minerva wanted to ask if he had missed her, too, but instead asked, "And after dinner?"

"Well, I paid a visit to the infirmary, supposedly to tell you that Severus had returned, then I went to my office."

"Did you have a nice visit with me in the infirmary, Albus?" Minerva asked, trying to make a joke.

Albus smiled slightly. "You were happy to hear that you'd be getting a new potion tomorrow."

"Mmm. And did you want to come visit me? *Here*, I mean, really I just need to know," she said softly. He certainly hadn't seemed to be in any hurry to come back to the suite.

"Of course I did, my dear. I just thought I'd give you some quiet, some time to make the transition, as Severus put it."

Minerva bristled and sat up, stiffening her back in anger. "Did that man tell you to stay away from me? If he so much as hinted "

"No, no. To the contrary." Albus averted his eyes. "He suggested I stay. He said he could wait in his rooms a few hours for me."

"Oh. Would it have made that much difference if he had gone to his rooms for a while?" Minerva's heart had dropped to her stomach. Had her actions helping Severus created a rift between them? She could deal with Severus rejecting her, but not Albus.

"No, I suppose not. But I do have more work to do, my dear. And I had thought to do it before retiring this evening. It still is waiting for me in my office."

Minerva looked at him, incredulous. Her first hours of freedom, and he wanted to go to his office and do work. No, it must be something else, he must simply not be able to bring himself to tell her that he didn't want to be there with her.

"All right, Albus. If that is what you need to do . . . I had looked forward to spending the evening with you, though," she said, trying one more time to express her desire for him to stay without sounding entirely selfish.

"We will spend time together." He patted her leg. "I promise."

"You could bring your work back with you. Do it here. I could help you." She wished she hadn't said that; now, if he were to decline, it would give her the answer she dreaded.

"No, I think not. Not tonight, anyway. Perhaps tomorrow." Albus stood and headed toward the Floo. He stopped a moment, looking at the table. "You didn't eat your dinner."

Her voice tight as she tried not to cry, Minerva said, "Wasn't hungry."

"You should eat, my dear. I will see you later." Albus took a pinch of Floo-Powder and was away in a flash of green.

The second he was gone, tears leaked from her eyes until they became a steady stream. Minerva sat on the couch, hugged a pillow to herself, and wept. This was nightmarish. She had thought the nightmare had begun when Severus had stepped up to her and red and gold sparks had flown from his body and that it had finally ended when he had left the bedroom that afternoon. But it hadn't. This was far worse than anything else that had occurred as a result of that awful curse. Had she destroyed the thing that gave her life and not mere existence? But Albus had said he wanted Severus to live. When she had asked about what he would do if she were unable to go through with the sex, Albus had not seemed relieved at that prospect, but grieved. If he had asked her not to do it, though, she would have abided by his wishes, as much as it would have plagued her to allow a man a *friend* to die if she could have prevented it. There was no right way to have behaved in this situation. She ~~had~~ to save Severus's life; she believed that Albus truly agreed that she had to. And yet . . . Albus couldn't even stay in the same room with her. If Minerva had felt defiled before, now she felt degraded, as well.

Perhaps they had not spoken often enough these last few days, but there were precious few opportunities . . . and when she had given him the opportunity to talk to her, he hadn't taken it. Minerva wished she had known that Albus would react like this. She had thought that he was trying to protect her by not speaking to her about his feelings, but now . . . she should have just let Severus take that potion, she thought in a moment of bitterness. Better that than to lose Albus.

Minerva dragged herself from the sofa and went into the bedroom that she shared with Albus. She couldn't look at his dressing gown and nightshirt she would never cease crying if she did. Another shower might help. She kicked off her shoes and headed toward the bathroom.

"Minerva?" His voice came from the open doorway.

She turned, wiping her face, knowing she must look a mess. She cleared her throat. "Yes? Did you forget something, Albus?"

"I forgot . . . I forgot to tell you that I was sorry."

"Sorry?" Minerva walked over to him.

"Yes . . . I feel . . . I feel as though I have failed you. I am not the wizard I once was. I should have been able to find a solution for the *Adfectus*; I should have been able to save you; I should be able to please you as I used to . . . I am sorry," he ended in a whisper.

Minerva listened, somewhat stunned, forgetting her own hurt in the face of his. She knew that Albus had an out-sized sense of responsibility, but this was absurd. And that business about pleasing her?

"Albus, you have nothing to feel sorry about. There was no solution. You could have worked without ceasing on only that problem for the past five days and done nothing else; you would not have found a solution. And whatever it is you mean by not pleasing me as you used to and I do have an idea of what you may mean by it you should put that out of your head completely. There is not one iota of sense in that. As I would show you if you let me." Minerva stroked his cheek; tears rose again in her eyes and she blinked them away. "I thought you believed in me, that you had faith in me and in us, Albus."

"I do . . . it's simply that this incident has shone a light on something that was true even before Severus was struck by that spell. I am making mistakes I should not make; I have lost my hand and cannot touch you as I used to; I leave you for days, even weeks, at a time, and you accept it without complaint, despite the fact that my absence leaves you to run the school. I could not find a solution to the *Adfectus*. I am not the wizard I once was, Minerva. I am not the wizard you fell in love with. It would hardly be a surprise if you would prefer me to . . . leave you alone. I certainly have earned your reproach."

Minerva stared up at him for a moment, flabbergasted. "Albus, you need more sleep. I know that may sound like a ridiculous response to what you have said, but it is the only one I have that makes any sense at all. I don't even know where to begin addressing what you claim . . . You have always made mistakes, as have we all, though fewer than most, and you have always taken every mistake very hard. You should give yourself some of that forgiveness you give so freely to others, my love. I thought we had worn out that conversation, but I see we have not. And you most assuredly have *not* earned my reproach. "

Minerva sighed as she put her arms around him and squeezed him, pulling him to her. "And your hand . . . oh, Albus, it pains me so that you have that injury. I would gladly cut off both my hands to be able to restore your own to you. But not because of any benefit you seem to think that I may get from it, but because it causes you pain and now it is causing you to have self-doubt whether about your magical abilities waning or about pleasing me. And neither could be further from the truth, my love. That curse would have killed almost anyone else in the wizarding world. I am very glad that it did not claim you." Minerva fought the tears that always came when she thought of how she might have lost him that day. "And you say that you are not the wizard I fell in love with. If you consider *only* the changes that time has wrought, you are no more the wizard I fell in love with than I am the witch *you* fell in love with; yet to me, you *are* still the wizard I fell in love with, and with whom I fall in love over and over again, every day. I love you so, Albus!" The tears she had been fighting came to her eyes. "And what would you have me say when you leave for all those days at a time? You will not tell me all that you are doing on these trips not even after one of them almost killed you. Would you have me ask you not to go? Not to leave me? I could not ask you to make that choice whichever you chose, it would hurt you. If you were to leave anyway, you would feel guilty and it would cause a rift between us. If you were to stay, you would feel you were not doing what you need to do to rid the world of Voldemort, and you would not be happy with yourself. I would never ask you not to do what you believe you must, but I have *never* pretended to be pleased you are leaving. So how could you have any thought that I do not care that you are gone? When you return, I am so happy to have you back safe with me . . . so happy, Albus, that what complaint do I have to make? The extra work? No, I am glad to do that for you . . . I have believed I was doing the right thing for you, supporting you, enabling you to do what you must do. How could I possibly make it harder for you by complaining? I *never* doubted that *you* would have preferred to be here with me instead of off on your trips even though you never told me so. How could you doubt *me*? Do you truly believe that the only alternative explanation for my lack of complaint is that I do not care whether you are here or not?"

Tears flowed down Minerva's face as she looked up at Albus and saw his own eyes bright with tears. "I cannot describe to you the joy I feel when the wards tingle and shift and I know you have returned. If I am teaching, it is all I can do to keep from running from the class to find you. I have always tried to make the first evening you are back especially nice for you, whatever it is you need from me. When you are not here, I wear your nightshirt to bed. When your absence is extended and I do not know where you are, I worry that you are hurt, or worse. And all I can do is wait for you to return and do my best to run the school in your absence. I thought you were . . . proud of me, at least, for that," she choked out the last sentence.

Albus put his arms around her. "I *am* proud of you. And I *do* love you; you know that," he whispered. "I never did doubt you, not really. I never believed you were happier without me here, not until today. But today . . . I tried to imagine what you were doing . . . and if I tried *not* to imagine it, my thoughts would return to it, anyway, and then I just kept thinking of all of the ways I had failed you, how you would be justified to reproach me for my failures. And then I thought . . . perhaps you wouldn't reproach me because he could satisfy you in ways . . ." He choked slightly. "I know you didn't want him before, but what if you wanted him now?" Minerva shook her head against his chest.

"I was unable to save you from having to do it. I should have been able to do that for you, Minerva. And I feared that you would blame me for it. Either you would want him or you would blame me. Either way, I worried I was not welcome."

Minerva's arms tightened around him even more. "You dear, sweet, and very foolish wizard! Why didn't you tell me all of this earlier? I tried to reassure you before, but I might have known better what to say if you had talked to me!" Minerva pulled him over to the bed; Albus followed willingly.

"I had been keeping busy. I hadn't wanted to think too much about it." Albus needed no urging to lie down on the bed beside Minerva. "There was no question that, if you were able to do this for Severus, it was a good thing. I did not want him to die of that ill-cast spell, for so many reasons, and I did hope that he would experience some of your genuine love before it was all over . . . but as time went on, I could see how he showered you with affection." Minerva pulled him closer as he spoke.

"Even on Friday evening, I knew that it was quite likely there was no cure for the spell but the one which you could provide him; yet as his attentions increased, I thought of all that I used to do for you, and that now, whether through circumstance or infirmity, I am unable to do. It wasn't even that *he* touched you that bothered me so, although I would be lying if I were to tell you it did not make me somewhat uncomfortable. It was that it was not I who was touching you that bothered me most, and it was not I who was spending hour upon hour with you, showering you with the attention you deserve, and which I have given you only in such sparing amounts of late. But I knew that the

spell had to run its course. There was nothing I could do or say about my discomfort that would not make the situation harder for you, and I could not spend time with you, shower you with attention, when Severus needed you . . . On the other hand, I did not want to appear not to care, as you had feared I might when you asked me whether I would" Albus swallowed and kissed her hair "have you be with Severus even if you did not wish to be. I also did not want to add to your burden by telling you of my own difficulties with the situation. And I really did *not* believe my difficulties were that great. I do care for Severus and trust him and I was truthful when I said I would rather it were he than some other wizard, but somehow, despite that, I felt . . . jealous, I suppose. Something I can honestly say that I have rarely felt in my life. But it was *you*, my dearest love," Albus said, caressing Minerva's face, "and I was unprepared for the effect it would have on me over time. Even though I did not witness most of his demonstrations of affection, I knew they were occurring and that they were growing in intensity and intimacy. I was so torn. I felt sympathy for you both, and on one level, I was happy that you were helping him; I was even truly pleased that he was receiving affection from you. On another level, though, I was very unhappy with the entire situation. I simply didn't allow myself to reflect on what bothered me about it.

"It didn't help that I was, and still am, angry with Severus for allowing this to happen. He couldn't have known, of course, what spell Pansy would cast, but he allowed the argument to get out of hand. When teenagers are involved in an emotional argument, you never know what kind of hexes they might throw. He knows that. Yet for me to have blamed him when he was already suffering . . . it didn't seem fair. But most of all, I did not want to hurt you, my love."

"I wish you had talked to me, nonetheless, Albus." Minerva's arms were around him, and Albus settled his head on her shoulder as she pulled him even closer to her and stroked his hair. "We could have shared the burden. I would have felt more free to discuss my own discomfort with the situation not just discomfort, but my *distress* with you. You may have taken some solace in the fact that I was not happy, myself. I tried my best to . . . enjoy aspects of it, as you suggested and correctly so, or I never would have been able to force myself to do what needed to be done. But you would have been able to understand that I was forcing myself. It was a choice I made only because the other choices were unacceptable, not because I wanted Severus's attentions that way. It became quite tedious at times. Boring, even."

"Boring? Having a wizard read you poetry, tell you he loves you, shower you with kisses, and give you massages was ~~boring~~?" Albus raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to look at her.

"Having any wizard but *you* do those things was tedious, boring, and even annoying. Especially on the schedule that the imperative imposed. If it hadn't been for the sleeping potion you provided, I am sure it would have driven me mad before it could have affected Severus!" she said with a smile. "Just imagine if some witch were hit by that spell and was at you every hour or so with proclamations of love, telling you how wonderful you are, kissing you and touching you. I hope you would find that tedious, as well, Albus!"

"Unless that witch were you, I would." He smiled. "I doubt I could find anything you did to be ~~tedious~~, my dear."

"Hmm, perhaps," Minerva replied, laying her head against his. "We still need to talk more, but I am beginning to get hungry now that I'm not worried that you think my contact with Severus defiled me you *don't* think that, do you?"

"*Nothing* could defile you, Minerva. Nothing." Albus raised his head and kissed her, softly, slowly, then with increasing passion, holding her to him tightly. He finally pulled away with a slight moan and whispered in her ear, "I love you, Minerva McGonagall. Forever, completely and utterly. Above all others." He held her in his arms a moment more, eyes closed, savouring the feel of her warmth and softness against him. With a deep sigh, he loosened his hold and looked down at her. "You still need your dinner, my dear."

"Yes, and I didn't eat much today, so I'm hungry," Minerva replied as they got up from the bed.

"Didn't you have lunch?" Albus took her arm and led her into the sitting room.

"No, nor breakfast. I had a half a sandwich part way through the afternoon." Minerva noticed a peculiar expression cross Albus's face; there and gone again, it was almost never there. "What is it, Albus?"

"Hmm? What? Nothing, my dear. Now this doesn't look very appetising anymore "

Minerva turned him around. "Don't change the subject, Albus. Something is wrong. What is it?"

Albus blinked and looked away, a slight blush creeping into his cheeks. "Nothing, really. Just . . . foolishness."

"Well, I've heard foolishness before. Tell me, Albus." When he just stood there, looking uncomfortably across the sitting room to the guest room door, Minerva took his arm and said, "You need to tell me whatever it is, foolish or not, Albus. Please."

His voice a hoarse whisper, he replied, "It is a very long time since we made love all day and forgot to eat . . ."

Minerva stared at him, open-mouthed, then chuckled bitterly. "Oh, Albus, I am not laughing at what you said, not exactly, and certainly not at your worries, but at what you are implying!" She guided him to a chair, embraced him, and kissed his cheek. "Sit, Albus, please. Oh, my. Well, let me reassure you, *quite* definitively, that the reason I skipped breakfast and lunch today was nothing like the reason you are suggesting." She took a deep breath and continued. "I really don't want to say anything that would embarrass Severus, you must understand that, Albus," she said as she took his hand. "But I missed breakfast because I was too unpleasantly nervous to eat *not* out of excitement at the prospect of what lay ahead and we skipped lunch because I just wanted the whole thing over with and didn't want to take the time to eat. I finally got hungry, and, although Severus's attention was clearly on something other than food, I began to think of what we might have to eat. When we did eat, it was not only because I was hungry, but also because I just needed a break from being groped. It was not the . . . passionate, exciting day you are probably envisioning, Albus. I did my best to . . . not hate it. That was the only way I could get through it without feeling disgusted by the whole thing. But, despite all the effort I had put in over the past few days to get used to it and relax under his touch, it was actually less . . . enjoyable than I had hoped I could make it probably because I knew how it was going to end, and I was not looking forward to that at all. Except, of course, because it would finally mean freedom."

"Oh. Hmm. I would like to say I'm sorry you didn't enjoy it more, Minerva . . . but as long as it wasn't completely awful, I can't say I'm unhappy." Albus looked uncomfortable. "That's not very kind of me."

"I think I'd be a little disturbed if you hoped it was even half as good as what we have when we're together, Albus."

"Half as good?" Albus looked at her. "I don't . . . I shouldn't ask, but . . ."

"Albus, nowhere near you. At all. But you know you are in a class by yourself." Minerva smirked slightly and added, "But even just considering my ~~very~~ hazy memory of what it was like before you . . . he would not have made the top two amongst them although, to be fair to Severus, part of that may have been my own inability to engage with him and let go. He has potential, though, and I think someday he might make a witch happy, if he ever has the opportunity."

"Ah, well, I didn't really need to know that. I mean, I'm glad to know it. But you didn't need to tell me."

"Ha! If you didn't need to know, you wouldn't have been so concerned that we spent the day in a state of frenzied, ecstatic passion, Albus. You silly, adorable wizard, as though anyone could make me feel anything like what I feel when I'm with you." Minerva smiled at him indulgently, and he grinned back, both relieved and amused.

"Well, you should cut the poor boy some slack, Minerva; after all, ~~am~~ much more experienced . . . especially when it comes to pleasing you." He smiled, his fingers caressing her hand.

"Mmm. Of course, dearheart. As though he could ever match you in that department!" Minerva winked and patted his arm. "But I'm glad we cleared that up."

"Nothing to clear up, my dear," Albus replied with an air of deliberate insouciance. "I never had a care in the world!" He chuckled at himself, and she joined him. "You know, my dear, your first suggestion may have actually been quite astute."

Minerva furrowed her brow. "What was that, Albus?"

"That I needed more sleep. I think if I had been better rested, my concerns would not have seemed as . . . *magnified* as they were. They wouldn't have disappeared altogether, but you are right. I am tired. And more prone to take myself too seriously."

"Hmmpf. We still need to talk more about that. But now *I* am hungry, my love. And tired. Wilspy!" Minerva called.

"Wilspy," Minerva said to the elf when she appeared before her, "bring us dessert. We are going to celebrate our freedom!"

Wilspy shivered a bit at that final word, but she smiled broadly to see her two Professors looking happy and without that strangely nice Professor Snape anywhere near. "Yes, ma'am, Professor Dumbledore's Minerva!"

"Dessert?"

"Yes, I ordered a special dessert for us, Albus. I thought you'd be coming here directly from the Great Hall and we could share it. Celebrate together." Minerva's eyes teared up at the memory of her recent hurt and feelings of rejection.

"I see. And I didn't come, and then I didn't stay. I am sorry, Minerva," he said softly. "I did not intend to hurt you. I simply did not know what to say or do. And I didn't know if you really wanted to see me or not."

"Don't apologise. I know you would never intentionally hurt me. And you are here now."

"I began to realise as soon as I left that there was something wrong. You hadn't eaten dinner. And you had said you wanted me to stay. More than once. It couldn't have been just to be polite."

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Albus, when have you known me in the last thirty-five years, anyway ever to say *anything* to you *merely* to be polite?"

"Well, considering your clearly-voiced opinions of one of my favourite robes, I would say . . . you haven't!" He smiled and took her hand. "I also should have known you had been expecting me because you were all dressed up. You look quite beautiful, my dear."

"Thank you, Albus." Minerva smiled.

Minerva's uneaten dinner disappeared from the table, replaced by an elaborately moulded G noise with dark chocolate icing drizzled over it and a large bowl of thickly whipped cream. A bottle of cognac and two snifters joined the cake.

"If you haven't eaten much today, Minerva, you should probably not have anything to drink."

"You are ridiculous, Albus," she grumbled, but happily. "Follow your own advice, and then I may follow it. Besides, this cake is rich enough for two meals!"

Albus simply grinned and allowed Minerva to serve them two overly large pieces of cake with huge dollops of whipped cream. He poured them each some cognac.

Minerva lifted her glass to him. "To freedom and to the return to the one I love."

Albus lifted his glass to her and blinked back tears. After sipping from the snifter, he said, "I am glad you are understanding and forgiving, my dear."

"How could I not be, with you, at least?" she answered. "Come, no more seriousness for now. Let's enjoy the cake and each other's company. We will have a lot of time to talk over the next few days . . ." Minerva paused as she raised her fork to her mouth. "Of course, I'll be stuck here the whole time. Unless I really want to go to the infirmary." She sighed and put her fork down without taking a bite.

"I think the infirmary would be quite dull, Minerva, and you couldn't easily go back and forth. When I finally return you there, you will have to remain there, I am afraid. But there is no reason for you to be entirely alone here eat some cake, my dear, it's delicious I can give Poppy the password and she can visit now that Severus isn't here. And if you would like, Severus could come back and visit tomorrow whilst he's supposedly brewing your potion. No need for you to be bored and lonely all by yourself here."

"Albus, I do appreciate your . . . *generosity* in offering to have Severus stay with me, but, and please don't tell him this, I am sick to death of spending time with him even though he wasn't himself. Not to mention the fact that, given he's just been released from the spell and is no doubt feeling very uncomfortable with his behaviour of the last five days, I doubt he would want to spend any time with me right now. If I'm uncomfortable with it, he surely must be." Minerva sighed and played with her whipped cream. "I suppose that Poppy could visit, though, as you say."

"As long as I have plenty of time with you, I think that would be lovely for you, Minerva."

She looked up, questioning.

"I do not want to leave your NEWTs and OWLs classes entirely without a teacher, and I do have a few other things I must do, but I think that I can arrange to spend most of my time here over the next few days. We shall see."

Minerva smiled brightly. "Oh, I *would* like that, Albus! We have had so little time together recently."

Albus grinned. "Well, since that idea was so well-received, I shall do what I can to spend as much time with you as possible until you are recovered from your 'grave illness.'"

"I would like that, Albus. I would like that very much."

Albus got a look in his eye at that moment, one which Minerva recognised quite well he had an idea and was up to something. But she had to pretend not to have a clue, as he always liked to surprise her completely, so she just took another bite of cake.

"My dear, I do promise to return as quickly as I can, but I truly do have a few things of vital importance that I must take care of tonight. Would you mind terribly if I were to leave now well, as soon as I've finished my cake to take care of them? I will return to continue this celebration of our freedom just as soon as I am able."

"Of course, Albus. Now that I am reassured that you do want to be here with me and that you don't . . . well, think less of me somehow for what I did "

"Oh, my dearest, how could you ever believe I would think less of you? You did what you had to to save Severus's life!"

"Well, I don't now, I guess, but when you left before, and you didn't really touch me, I felt . . . sullied, I suppose. I thought you might not want to touch me after . . ."

Albus pushed his chair away from the table and swung his legs around. He reached out his left hand to her. "Come here, Minerva. Come here, please."

Minerva let him pull her onto his lap. She let out a relieved and happy sigh as she lay her head on his shoulder and put her arms around his neck.

"I told you this before, Minerva, but I want to say it again now, so there is no mistake," Albus said quietly. "Nothing could sully you. Nothing could defile you. And nothing could make me lose my desire to be with you, to touch you, to kiss you, and to hold you."

Minerva placed her hand on the side of his head and looked into his bright eyes before she kissed him. "Mmm. It is so wonderful to kiss you, Albus." She sighed with happiness and relief as she kissed him again, threading her fingers through his hair, pulling him to her, not wanting to stop. Finally, though, she leaned back and looked at him. "I don't particularly want to let you go, but I suppose the sooner I do, the sooner you will return."

His face was relaxed into a contented smile. "I don't want to leave, but *will* return as quickly as I am able, my dear," Albus replied, giving her one last kiss before letting her go so she could stand.

"Will you be seeing Severus?"

"I plan to; why?"

"I have something for him . . . it's just the letter that Hermione wrote. He probably won't want to keep it, but I thought I'd give it to him, anyway. Allow him to dispose of it as he sees fit."

"I doubt he will want a reminder of his ordeal, but I will give it to him."

Minerva fetched the letter, then told him, "I altered it to look like a list of potions ingredients, but the password is the same 'Phoenix' if he cares to read it again."

"All right, my dear." He kissed her cheek, then looked at her a moment, and kissed her lips softly. "I will try not to be long."

Minerva caressed his cheek. "I look forward to your return."

Twelve: Return

Chapter 12 of 16

Severus returns to where it all began and encounters a few people whom he would have preferred to avoid.



Chapter Twelve: Return

Severus returned to his office after dinner, desiring to reclaim his old life as quickly as possible, and put the past five days behind him as if they had never happened. He squelched the thought that it would be an impossible task, and he beat back the sense of despair and desolation that began to encroach on his consciousness as his customary loneliness crept back upon him, seeming almost a stranger after the past few days spent in the company of Minerva . . . and Albus.

He had been unable to urge Albus to stay and wait for Minerva, nor to persuade him to hurry back to her immediately after dinner. Severus didn't know what was wrong with the man, but clearly there was nothing he could do about it. He'd interfered with their lives too much, as it was, even if he *had* had any idea what to say that might convince Albus to go see Minerva. A harsh expression crossed his face, one that could be mistaken for a sneer, but which was more a grimace of pain, as he remembered Albus's revelation that he and Minerva were not simply long-time lovers, but that they were actually married. All that he had imposed upon Minerva over the last several days seemed all the worse, knowing that, and her kindness and generosity, all the greater. And Albus's own acquiescence not just acquiescence, but his *support* that had been a great sacrifice for him, Severus was sure.

Severus sighed as he approached his office. He was now even more indebted to the old wizard; he would have to find a way to dissuade him from their current course. He could pay for his own foolishness, when the time came. As Minerva said, he had a tendency to make self-destructive choices. He should bear the brunt of the outcome of those choices; it should not fall so heavily on others.

He withheld a groan as he saw Lupin waiting outside his office for him, smiling as he saw Severus approaching.

"Lupin," he greeted him curtly.

"Hi, Severus. As I said during dinner, I have a few things to go over with you, and I thought that now might be convenient."

"Tomorrow night would be better. You have another day of teaching, after all. I have a potion to brew." Severus wanted the werewolf away so that he could reset his wards. Of course, Lupin might expect to use his office again tomorrow . . .

"Oh, I know. But I found something that I wanted to ask you about, actually."

Severus sneered. "You *found* something, Lupin? Snooping your nose about where it didn't belong?"

Lupin reddened. Severus couldn't tell whether it was from embarrassment or from anger. "I did not 'snoop,' Severus. The Headmaster showed me where you kept the students' work, and other than that, I didn't look at anything. What I found was on top of your desk in plain sight when I came in on Tuesday morning."

Severus grunted. It *had* been a bad idea to have the beast teach for him; another sure sign he had not been in his right mind when he'd agreed to it. Seeing that Remus wasn't going anywhere, Severus gave the password to his office, letting them both in. He would change the wards at the end of the evening, if he had a moment's peace.

His desk was neat and tidy, a single pile of graded essays sitting in the centre of it. Severus sat behind his desk, forcing Remus to perch in one of his uncomfortable guest chairs, if he wanted to sit. Remus didn't seem to notice that Severus was taking over his office again, but reached into one of his capacious pockets to pull out a small sheaf of parchments. Wordlessly, he handed them to Severus, watching Severus's face. Other than a slight quirk of an eyebrow, the Potions master's expression betrayed

nothing.

"I was surprised to see that Hermione Granger had detention with you, Severus. And particularly that you would have her write so many lines . . . not to mention their content."

Severus sneered. "You are not as clever as you think, Lupin." He waved his wand over the pages, revealing that the lines had been written with the aid of magic. Granger had been rather clever about it, though, varying the handwriting from line to line, making them look as though they'd actually been handwritten. He wanted to chuckle at her choice of lines, but restrained himself in Lupin's company.

"She wrote her lines using magic?" Remus looked perplexed. "What would be the point?"

"The *point* is to make certain dunderheads believe that she had detention and that she wrote lines for them, of course. She needn't have gone to such lengths, but she is a very canny young witch."

"Hmmpf. I heard something about that from someone "

"*Potter*, no doubt," he spat. "Precisely why I trust no one. Idiot boy."

"Yes, well, he simply thought it was unfair that you had given Hermione detention when she had only tried to get them to keep quiet."

"Did they tell you what they were saying? No, I thought not." Severus narrowed his eyes. "Certainly the content of Hermione's lines which I did~~not~~ assign her, if you are not clear on that point yet that should have told you something about their offense."

"Oh, well, all right, Severus. I just thought that a thousand lines . . . and such a long line. It seemed somewhat harsh."

Severus actually did bark a laugh at that. "Miss Granger assigned them to herself, and it should not come as a surprise to you, given what the girl is capable of. You didn't see Umbridge after the Headmaster retrieved her from the Forbidden Forest, did you? She is one of the few Gryffindors who actually uses her brain and if you tell *anyone* that I said that . . ." Severus trailed off menacingly.

"No, of course not, Severus," Remus said hastily. "Well, you see that I finished grading the essays you assigned. If you'd like to look at them before the students get them back . . ."

"No. I will keep a copy of them, find out what they didn't understand, though." Severus waved his wand, duplicating the set of parchments on some blank parchment stacked on the corner of his desk, then handed the originals back to his stand-in. "You may return them."

"I don't know if I graded to your standards "

"It is inconsequential, Lupin, as long as they apply themselves to mastering what they did not understand and are able to use it in practice." Grudgingly, he added, "I am sure that your comments were useful in that regard, even if your grades are inflated."

Remus beamed. "I have tried, Severus. It was good of you to have me substitute for you. I'm sure the Board of Governors wouldn't approve of having me back in the long-term, but I felt . . . somewhat redeemed coming back, even if only for a few days. I really appreciate your confidence in me."

"Albus suggested you. It was not my idea."

"But Albus said that he gave you a choice, and you chose me over Kingsley."

"Yes, well, my own first thought had been Moody, so you can see that I was not thinking clearly."

Remus chuckled. "Nonetheless, I appreciate it, Severus. Thank you."

"Mmm. You're welcome, then." He tried to put some sarcasm into the words, but bit it back at the last minute. It still came out grudgingly. "And I'll be brewing tomorrow." He sighed. "I will wait until tomorrow evening to change the wards. You may continue to use my office tomorrow, if you require it." There, he'd discharged whatever debt he may have had toward Lupin . . . although he still felt that Lupin owed *him* for so many years and so many injuries. But perhaps Minerva had been right, and it would be better for him to let go a little bit. It had always been such a comfort to remember all the hurts he had ever suffered and use them to justify his own behaviour, though.

"Thank you, Severus. That would be convenient." Remus stood there awkwardly.

"Well? Was there something else, Lupin?" Severus hoped that the werewolf didn't think he had a new friend. His hopes were dashed.

"I was just wondering if you'd like to have a drink tonight, later, after you're done . . . here . . ." Remus trailed off, unsure of what Severus actually had planned for the evening and feeling put off by the blank expression on Severus's face. Albus had said he thought Severus might appreciate a gesture of reconciliation; Remus thought that a drink might be an appropriate gesture. And Severus had made a gesture, himself, allowing him to use the office another day.

"I am somewhat fatigued after my trip, Lupin," Severus answered as civilly as he could.

"Um, of course. Right. But you know which rooms I'm using . . . if you change your mind. Just a drink. No need for, um, a lot of conversation." Remus couldn't read Severus's expression at all and felt increasingly stupid. He backed toward the door

"I am sure we both have something to do now, though, Lupin, so if you could leave to take care of your business, I can take care of mine."

Lupin nodded, opening the door. "Well, have a good evening, then, Severus. I am glad that your trip was a success . . . although it's all very mysterious."

Severus glared at him. Idiot Gryffindor. Anyone could be hanging about, listening. "No mystery involved, none whatsoever. You are surely aware that Professor McGonagall has not been recovering from the febrile magical distemper as well as Madam Pomfrey had hoped. Mongolian magical creeperwort must be picked within a few days of use for this particular potion. But you never were particularly good at Potions, were you?" A sneer escaped Severus, and he felt like smiling: it was so good to be back to normal again.

"You're right, Severus, of course." Remus backed out the door. "Good night."

Severus heaved a sigh of relief when the door closed behind his unwanted visitor. Hopefully the rest of the evening would be quiet. Severus began to read through the essays he had copied. He'd been right: Remus's comments were useful and his grading was too easy. If he finished reading these tonight, he might be able to get back to his book, *Defence with No Danger is No Fun*, before curfew and his rounds, although the book did not hold the same attraction for him as it had. Still, it was his only escape.

When there was a knock on his door twenty minutes later, Severus gritted his teeth, then said, "Come!" and flicked his wand to unlatch the door. His eyes narrowed as he saw who was standing there.

"I am afraid that the person you are seeking is not here. I believe he retired for the evening. You can see him tomorrow."

"I actually came to see you, sir. I hoped you would be here."

"Then get in here, Miss Granger, and shut the door behind you." Gods, he did not want to have yet another Gryffindor trying to have a heart-to-heart with him, particularly not one who had seen him snivelling and behaving like a love-sick fool. But it would be wise to speak with her, put the fear of Snape in her, keep her quiet and out of the way.

As soon as she closed the door, he flicked a casual nonverbal Imperturbable followed by a squelching *Colloportus*, emphasising that he was himself again and no longer required the assistance of a sixth-year student to cast a few spells.

"Well, Miss Granger?" He sat stiffly behind his desk.

"I just wanted to stop by to tell you that I'm glad you're back, sir, and to apologise."

Another Gryffindor apology! They always thought that an apology would heal all after they had behaved with no forethought. "And for what, precisely, are you apologising this time, Miss Granger?" he asked icily.

"I didn't realise that anyone else would be using your office, you see, and I left my lines on your desk for you. Remus Professor Lupin asked me about them. I had to tell him that you had me write them in my detention the other night, sir. I didn't know how much he knew, first of all, and secondly, Harry and Ron were standing right there. I think that Professor Lupin was rather upset about it, and he said he'd talk to you; even though I asked him not to, I thought he might, anyway."

"Yes, he did ask about them. Fortunately, he was so surprised by the fact that you hadn't really written the lines that he didn't think to ask why we needed such a ruse."

She smiled. "Oh, good! You two don't seem to get along particularly well, and I was rather nervous about any confrontation."

Severus glared at her. "I do believe I can hold my temper with a colleague, Miss Granger."

"I know, I just didn't want you to have one more reason to dislike him, that's all," she responded nervously.

"One reason more or less will change nothing. Not all things can be mended; you need to learn that if you are to get by in this world." When she merely nodded, looking uncomfortable, he recalled the reason for her supposed detention and added more gently, "But it was thoughtful of you to come by."

Hermione brightened some at that. "At least our ruse was convincing! I was a little worried because it might have seemed odd to the boys that you fetched me from the library, but they didn't ask about that."

"Hmmpf. Goes along with my general git behaviour, that I'd hunt you down in the library and drag you off to torment you." He smirked. "But these particular lines, Miss Granger: 'I will not associate with dunderheads when they are disrespecting Hogwarts' best teacher'?"

"Yes, well, I thought that was sort of git-like, and it was ambiguous as to which teacher the lines referred to."

"So you believe that Professor McGonagall is the best teacher at Hogwarts?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"I don't know. She is very good. I admire her a lot," Hermione equivocated.

Snape's lips twitched. "But I am not."

"I didn't say that . . . you can be quite good, sometimes." Hermione reddened.

"Mmm. But merely competent, not outstanding."

Hermione shrugged slightly, even more uncomfortable.

"You needn't answer that, Hermione. It wasn't a question." Severus swallowed a sigh.

"You are admirable, though, sir. Just not for the same reasons that I admire Professor McGonagall. But you are both very brave." Hermione's blush deepened and she looked down.

Severus remembered then that Hermione knew of his previous predicament and likely understood enough about the spell to know what had allowed him to return to teaching. He flushed. He should be nasty to her, show her that just because he had turned to her for help when he was not himself, it did not mean that their relationship had changed or that his feelings toward her had altered one whit. But that was untrue, and he remembered her Cheering Charm and her discretion, and he could not bring himself to be venomous toward her. He remembered how he'd felt after he had been so nasty to Minerva, and his subsequent resolution not to say anything if he did not know what to say, so he just nodded awkwardly at Hermione.

"I've been enjoying the chocolates, sir," Hermione said shyly, after a moment or two of silence.

"Good. Good." He looked at the young witch, who was perched on the edge of one of his chairs, and he felt a sudden rush of sorrow that he would not see her grow completely into adulthood, that he would be dead or lost by that time, that, even if he weren't, he could never be friends with another Gryffindor; his life simply did not permit it. And for now, he was her teacher, though he did not know for how much longer.

"Hermione," he said as gently as he was able, "I do appreciate your assistance over the last few days, and your continued discretion, but I put you in an unfair position, both initially, when you were trying to stop the argument, and later, when I asked you to do me that favour. I am your teacher, and it is my duty to protect you and not just from escaped convicts and ravening werewolves." He paused a moment, wondering incongruously whether werewolves could be said to "raven," then he continued, "I also should not have asked you to take your valuable time to run that errand for me, either."

"I didn't mind, though, sir, really. And after all," she said with a grin, "I got some boomslang skin and a box of chocolates out of it, and I hadn't expected anything other than a bit of fresh air and exercise!"

"Nonetheless, I want you to know that if you need my assistance in the future, you may come to me. I may need to appear to be grudging about it. I am sure you know why but you can count on my assistance and that I will do what I can to protect you in the future." Minerva's words about the safety of the students being his highest duty rang in his head again.

"Thank you, Professor. I had come to believe I could count on you." Hermione's expression was serious, even grave.

"And I let you down when you learned that I had been watching you from the shadows on Friday . . ."

"Well . . . yes, actually," she responded softly.

"I certainly did not intend to let it escalate as far as it did. I misjudged. But I should have intervened immediately, and I paid dearly for my inaction, Hermione, and not only I." He sighed. It did feel good to be able to speak to her like this, openly and truthfully, but it would have to be their last such conversation, and she would need to understand that.

"I know, sir. Umm, how is Professor McGonagall?" On seeing his expression, she added hastily, "If I may ask . . . I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"Your Head of House is well. She was quite well when I left her," he said, wondering whether Albus had gone to see Minerva yet and feeling vaguely uncomfortable that he

had not prevailed upon him to stay and see her.

"Good. I'm glad. I didn't think she wouldn't be, but "

"I am sure you can speak with her in a few days, Miss Granger. I think it an inappropriate topic of conversation at the moment."

"Of course, sir. I'm glad you are both well, though."

"Thank you, Miss Granger." He hesitated. He remembered Minerva's exhortation to be kind. He couldn't always be kind; it would be foolish in the extreme. But here and now . . . "Miss Granger . . . Hermione, I do appreciate your assistance, as I said, and your discretion, and I am sure that Professor McGonagall does, as well. But you understand my position here. Beyond the fact that my requests of you in recent days have been . . . unorthodox . . . you are wise enough, I believe, to know that such interaction must not be repeated. Indeed, even this conversation stretches the bounds of prudence."

"I know, sir. I understand. You have to be a 'nasty bastard.' But I'll remember what you said today."

Severus quirked a slight smile. "I am sure you will, Hermione."

He stood and picked up his wand. "And now, Miss Granger, it is time to return to the reality of nasty bastards and proper professional distance. Continue to enjoy your chocolates, Miss Granger."

"I will, Professor. Thank you." She stood and waited while he lifted the wards.

Severus ended the Imperturbable and the *Colloportus* , then flicked his wand and opened the door. Raising his voice, he said, "Now be on your way, Miss Granger! And remember what I told you! I expect little of Gryffindors, though, and do not see why you should be an exception." The sneer in his voice was acid.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, Professor. I will try to do better in the future." Hermione sounded dejected and cowed, but, just before she turned to leave, she gave him a small smile and winked. His lack of reaction to this bit of cheek seemed to please her, and she grinned at him before allowing a suitably subdued expression to settle on her face and turning to leave.

Severus was prepared to close the door behind Hermione, when he heard her greet someone, and then that someone appeared in his doorway. A plague of Gryffindors. But Severus could not turn this one away, as dearly as he wished not to have to see him again for at least a few days. What do you say to the wizard whose wife you had just slept with, with his blessing?

"Good-evening, Severus."

"Headmaster." Severus nodded in greeting. "I did not expect to see you again this evening." He hesitated, then, thinking of his debt to Minerva, he said, "I had expected you to be spending it with Professor McGonagall."

Albus turned and closed the door behind him. Severus cast an Imperturbable, then, before Albus could say anything, said, "Albus, you should be with her, not wandering about paying visits on your staff."

"Thank you for your concern, Severus, but I have just come from her and will be returning shortly . . . I appreciate that you attempted to have me see her sooner than I did, too." Albus Transfigured one of the chairs into a pouffy chintz armchair and settled down.

"Hmmpf." Severus sat. "I do not mean to be blunt, but what are you doing here, then?" Suddenly worried, he said, "She is all right, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is fine, Severus. I am trying to make arrangements for the next few days. I would like to ask a favour of you tomorrow."

"I am meant to brew Minerva's potion tomorrow. I thought I would actually do so. We can send it to St. Mungo's and say that it was what remained after Minerva's treatment. After all, Moody did bring back a sufficient amount of Mongolian magical creeperwort to make a vat of the stuff, and the potion keeps indefinitely."

"Will it take you all day?"

"No, just the morning, probably. I should be able to decant it by early afternoon. If you would like me to take the afternoon Defence classes, I could probably take the last one, at least."

"That would be fine, but I will leave that to you and Remus to arrange. I would like you to take the sixth-year Transfiguration class tomorrow. It meets during your usual free hour. Her fifth-year OWLs class follows immediately after that. If you'd like to take that one, too, I have no objection, but if you would prefer, you may return to your final Defence class and have Remus take the fifth-year class."

"I would prefer to return to teaching my own class as soon as possible, Albus."

"Very well. Then when you make arrangements with Remus about that, could you ask him if he would mind staying on a few more days and taking Minerva's classes on Friday and on Monday? She will be returning to teaching on Tuesday. If he is willing to take her classes all of them until then, I would be grateful."

Severus opened his mouth, then closed it. He wished that Albus would just speak with the werewolf about it himself, but he supposed that it was the least he could do after having had sex with the older wizard's wife. "I am sure that he will be pleased to stay on a few days, Albus. I will speak to him about it for you."

"Very good! I will stop by your office tomorrow after lunch to see him and give him the lesson plans and such. And, Severus, one other thing . . . I know you will be busy, but I would like to spend more time with Minerva over the next few days. I am going to ask Filius to take on some of my usual day-to-day duties, and I would like to be able to tell him that he can count on your assistance."

"Of course he can, Albus. I have never hesitated to give him my assistance in the past; he knows that. You needn't even ask." Severus was somewhat annoyed that Albus felt he had to make it a special request. He may not be a particularly pleasant colleague, but he had always pulled his weight more than his weight, in fact.

"I was somewhat surprised to see Miss Granger leaving your office, and looking so unhappy, as well, Severus. You really should be easier on her. She did exercise discretion and concern for you, after all."

Severus gritted his teeth. "And if it had not been you outside the door, but Draco Malfoy or anyone else, for that matter I am sure that it would have been quite eye-opening for them to hear me wish her to enjoy her chocolates as I bade her a fond adieu," he said acerbically.

"Well, of course, you are right, but you needn't be facetious, Severus. A simple 'good-evening, Miss Granger,' would suffice and would raise no suspicions."

"I was not being facetious, Albus. I was being quite literal. Before I shooed the girl from my office, I told her that I hoped she would continue to enjoy the chocolates I gave her."

Albus looked at him, brows raised. "You gave Miss Granger chocolates, Severus?"

Severus hesitated. He had a perfect memory of the past five days, and it was extremely uncomfortable to remember most aspects of them. Almost every aspect, in fact. He sighed. "Are you aware that I gave Minerva a box of chocolates, Albus?"

"Yes . . . I saw them. I had a white chocolate filled with effervescent lemon cream. It was . . . quite nice." He looked at Severus, a bemused expression on his face. "That

was the favour you had asked of Miss Granger, then? To fetch the chocolates for Minerva?"

"Yes. And," Severus said, looking down at his desk and shaking his head at the memory, "I had her purchase a second box for herself. They were huge boxes. Hermione's isn't as large as Minerva's, of course, but I imagine they will last her for weeks, since it would be rather difficult to share a large, heart-shaped box of chocolates without having to answer a lot of questions about where she got them. That was also an ill-conceived idea, but I was feeling . . . grateful, and slightly guilty, and she was pleased . . ." He looked up at Albus. "So you see, Albus, I was not gratuitously nasty to her. And I believe she quite enjoys playing along when I insult her now."

"Do you, Severus? And her unhappy expression clues you into that?" Albus asked with a slight smile.

"No, her wink and her grin clued me in," he said sharply before cutting himself off, suddenly aware of what he'd said and afraid the Headmaster would draw the wrong conclusions. Severus ground his teeth together and glared.

But Albus just grinned at him, the barmy old codger. "Well, that's nice, Severus. Another ally within the Order. Of course, she's not in the Order yet, but she will be."

"It will hardly matter, though, Albus, by that time "

"Well, that is a discussion for another time," Albus said, interrupting. "You know how to find me, though, Severus. You may Floo through, if necessary, and fetch me. Or you may call Wilsby. I shall tell her to continue to respond to you if you call. I will tell Filius that he can rely on you to contact me in an emergency. Normally, Minerva takes care of everything when I'm away, but with both of us gone, well, Filius may need to call upon you. Oh, and Minerva gave me this for you. It's Miss Granger's letter. The password is the same as it was. 'Phoenix.'"

Severus nodded and accepted the parchment from Albus's outstretched hand, wishing he could be left alone to return to his normal, miserable existence, rather than having to suffer through this prolonged, irritating reminder of his folly and his embarrassing behaviour over the last several days.

"Minerva is probably waiting for you, Albus."

"Yes, right. I'll just stop by and see Filius, then I think I'll be through for the evening. I will not be at breakfast, but I will come to either lunch or dinner, I believe . . ." Albus edged toward the door.

Severus stood. "Good-night, Albus." There must be some residue of the spell remaining, he thought, for he felt inexplicably guilty now, wanting to rush the old wizard off the way he had. "Wait, Albus . . . I wanted to say something."

Albus paused by the door as Severus came around his desk.

"Thank you." Severus looked at him, wishing he knew what else to say, but even if he were normally better at expressing gratitude, this situation was so unusual, he'd likely still be at a loss for words. He swallowed. "Just . . . thank you. For everything these last days."

Albus's eyes glittered brightly with gathering tears. He raised his right hand slightly, then dropped it, reaching out with his left one, instead, and grasping the younger wizard's arm. "I am glad you are well, Severus. Very glad, indeed." He gave Severus's arm a squeeze. "You will come for a drink one evening after Minerva has returned, won't you?"

Severus nodded stiffly, uncomfortable with the old wizard's emotion. At least he hadn't tried to hug him. "Of course."

After Albus left, Severus went back and sat at his desk. Stuffing Hermione's letter into his warded drawer with his copy *Defence with No Danger*, he remembered how he had sat there the previous Friday, listening to the Slytherins arguing, how he had afterwards returned to his desk and how, realising that the spell had affected him, he had decided to see Minerva to ask her for her help.

Severus held his head in his hands. He would get no work done that evening. And he had to see Lupin. Sighing, he left his office and set off for the guest room near Gryffindor Tower. Lupin would probably offer him that drink, but better to get the arrangements over with now. And he could use a drink. Even if it was with a werewolf that had tried to kill him.

Thirteen: Healing

Chapter 13 of 16

Albus returns to Minerva and takes his time to help her find her healing and receive some himself. A particularly peculiar potion lends a hand.



Chapter Thirteen: Healing

Albus Flooed back to the hidden rooms after setting his plans in place. He had great hopes that Minerva would be pleased by the arrangements he had made. She knew very well that sacrifices would be a part of her life when she had bound her fate to his own, all those years ago. But those sacrifices, which Minerva made so ungrudgingly even when it was painful for her to do so, they did not need to be unmitigated and unrelieved. He could make the time that they could have together the very best possible for her, make memories for her to savour. Albus loved Minerva without compare, and much as he would prefer to live a quiet home life with her, it was not possible without making other sacrifices that were not his to make. Tonight, he would remind her of his love for her and ensure that she knew that he didn't take her for granted. He never had, but he could see how it might appear that way to her occasionally, just as, in his own earlier nervous exhaustion, Albus had considered that perhaps Minerva might be happier when he was away from the castle than when he was with her. Under ordinary circumstances, he would never have believed such a thing, but the circumstances over the last few days were far from ordinary.

Looking around the sitting room, Albus noticed that Wilsby had cleared away their dessert. Minerva must be in the bedroom. He smiled. No interruptions this night. No

rising to go and appease the *Adfectus*, letting Severus touch her and hold her. Minerva wasn't in the dimly lit bedroom when he walked in, and he could hear the shower running in the bathroom. Another shower?

Albus sighed. Although Minerva had participated in relieving Severus of the spell of her own free will, and Albus was sure that Severus had been gentle with her and she with him, from what little Severus had said Minerva must still feel uncomfortable with what happened. She had used the word "sullied." His earlier reassurances and her own understanding of the spell and that what she had done saved Severus's life had apparently not been sufficient to keep Minerva from feeling as though she were somehow unclean. She was probably trying to wash away Severus's touch and her own memory of it.

Albus removed his shoes and socks and shed his clothes, leaving his robes lying negligently on the floor beside the bathroom door before he opened it and entered the steam-filled room. Minerva's own robes had been discarded on a chair, and her jewellery lay carelessly beside the sink. Albus could just make out Minerva's form behind the foggy glass doors of the large shower. Her hair was still up, and she didn't appear to be doing anything but standing in the corner of the shower, her forehead against the tiles, her arms folded above her head, a posture of dejection. Albus winced in sympathy. He quietly opened the glass door.

"Minerva." His voice was soft.

She raised her head from its point of rest, but did not turn. "Albus?"

"Ah, Minerva, my darling Minerva," he said as he stepped into the shower behind her. "Who else would look for you here, my sweetest one?" He laid a warm, patient hand on her shoulder.

Minerva turned her face slightly. "I don't know what it is, Albus, I just don't know . . . I . . . I was so excited about your coming back, so looking forward to it, to being alone with you . . . but then I thought of what I'd done this afternoon . . . it came back to me, and I thought I couldn't . . . have you touch me yet . . . not yet. It feels . . . wrong . . . no, not wrong, but just . . . something. I don't know . . .," she ended in a whisper.

Albus stepped closer to her, and on her back, she could feel his warmth radiating from him.

"Mmm. So another shower . . .," Albus murmured.

Minerva nodded.

"Then I shall help you bathe, my love, my dearest one, and we will wash it away together, hmm?"

He Summoned a bath sponge, and at a whispered spell, it was filled with lovely rose-scented suds. Minerva sighed, closed her eyes, and relaxed as Albus ran the sponge over her back. He reached up and gently brought first one then the other of her arms down to her sides, sliding the soapy sponge over each one in turn before kneeling behind her to wash her legs and buttocks. As he washed her legs, he kissed the soft cheeks before him and felt Minerva shudder slightly as he did so, but she offered no protest. Albus brought the sponge up and down her legs, gliding his hand between them, and was pleased when she finally relaxed and allowed him to sponge her tender crux, but he did not linger there.

As he stood, Albus reached around Minerva and gently bathed her stomach, then her chest, and finally her breasts, circling each one, spiralling the sponge in toward one nipple then out again to find the other. He worked his way up, bathing her throat and the nape of her neck, planting petal-soft kisses on her shoulders as he did so. Minerva was almost limp now, one hand on the tile, her head tilted forward and resting in the angle of the two walls.

"Won't you turn around for me now, my dear Minerva?" Albus whispered.

As Minerva turned to face him, Albus gently guided her, and when he brought his hand to her face, he tenderly wiped her silent tears away. Then the sponge was gone, and his fingers traced her features, feather-light touches to her brow, eyes, cheeks, lips, nose. His own eyes filled with tears as he bent and kissed her forehead softly, softly. He closed his eyes and nuzzled her hair and his tears leaked out to fall on her brow.

Minerva raised her hands and held his face between them, gazing into his eyes. "Albus . . . oh, Albus," she sighed, relief mingled with pain.

He smiled reassuringly and kissed her lips lightly once, then again.

"Mmm, Albus." Minerva rested her head on his shoulder and he drew her closer. The shower had stopped, though she barely noticed, aware only that now she could hear his heartbeat. His breath washed over her, and she raised her face to breathe it in. "Oh, gods, Albus, I love you so." She sighed and rested her weight more heavily against him, relishing the sensation of his magic thrumming with his pulse, like an orchestra performing a symphony.

Albus tilted Minerva's face and kissed her mouth, savouring her hum of satisfaction.

"Tell me, Albus, say it to me, please." She gazed up at him imploringly.

He knew what she wanted to hear. But this time he did not protest and barely even hesitated before saying the words he so seldom uttered, and never of his own accord. "You are mine, Minerva." And he kissed her again.

Minerva deepened the kiss before pulling back slightly and whispering, "Again, please, Albus, please."

"You are mine, Minerva, you belong to me," he repeated as he held her close, kissing her neck, then breathing the words again into her ear, "You are mine, and mine alone, Minerva. You are my love, my dearest one, my beloved, my heart, my wife, and," Albus paused, sucking her earlobe, before continuing, "you are mine. Mine. My Minerva."

Minerva's breath quickened with his words and his kisses. "Oh, Albus, I need you to . . . to make it all right . . . to wash it all away . . ." She gasped as his tongue found the sensitive spot on her neck and then his lips sucked on it. "Inside and out, Albus . . . oh, gods!"

His hand suddenly cupped her warm sex and his fingers caressed the soft folds sheltering her sweet entrance.

"Here, Minerva?" he asked hoarsely.

"Ahh . . . yes . . . yes, Albus."

"And here?" His finger gently slid into her. "Here, too?"

"Oh, please, Albus." Minerva wept against his chest, drawing a shuddering breath through his beard and choking a sob out again.

"Ah, my love, I do not wish to rush you or hurt you "

"No, you aren't, please, Albus . . . please, wash it all away. All of it. Everywhere." She looked up at him, and, reassured, he smiled warmly, a twinkle in his eye.

"I think I know what might just do that for you . . ." He pressed against her, then took her hand and guided it to his erection. "Here, do you think that this" he kissed her again "that this might do the job, my love?"

"Mmm." Minerva returned his kiss, thrusting her tongue into his mouth and drawing his into her own. "Mmm, yes, yes, Albus." She squeezed his cock, then whispered in his ear, "Hard, Albus, hard. Please. Take me hard."

She could feel Albus swallow and shiver before he whispered a spell, and she felt herself pulled from her corner of the shower, lifted, and pushed flat to the wall, her back pressed firmly against the tile. He could have done it nonverbally, but would not, wishing not to startle her. Albus withdrew a little and look into Minerva's eyes; she nodded slightly.

Albus's mouth met hers as he reached down and raised her right leg, urging it to encircle his hips. Minerva raised her other leg and brought it around him, embracing him fully. His erection pressed against her belly. She moaned and reached for it, but Albus took her hand and gently moved it away, breaking their kiss.

"Say it, Albus, please, say it again." Minerva caressed his beard, moving it aside, then kissing his exposed neck. "Mmm. Again, please."

"Not yet, my dear, not yet," Albus whispered as he fondled her breast and showered her hair with kisses. Then he drew back out of her embrace, gazing at her, still supported against the wall by the spell. He trailed his hand along her cheek, down her neck and her side until he reached her hip. His fingers swept across to the thatch of dark curls then down to her damp clitoris. He smiled at Minerva's sharp intake of breath.

"Now," he said in a low voice. "Mine. You are mine. Now. You are mine, my beautiful Minerva. You are beautiful. You are mine. My Minerva."

Minerva reached out, trembling, and rested her hands on his shoulders. Her lips parted, but she didn't speak. Albus leaned forward and kissed her lips, then breathed, "You are mine," into her mouth as his fingers continued to tease below.

He stepped into her waiting embrace, grasping her shoulder and pressing her hard against the wall; her legs went around him, and he drove into her deeply.

As his cock buried itself within her, he whispered in her ear, "You are mine, Minerva, always mine. Mine." Then, more loudly, as he began thrusting, he looked into her eyes and said, "You are mine alone, Minerva. Mine. Mine."

"Yes, oh, yes, Albus! I am yours, only ever yours! Yours! Always! Yours!"

She continued to murmur and moan as he drove hard into her, pounding his cock deep, deep, deep, thrusting again and again, the shaft of his cock rubbing against her clitoris each time he withdrew and his pelvis massaging it each time he drove home again. His shaft pounded into her harder and deeper as he breathed the words she needed to hear into her ear. Minerva felt heat and throbbing surge within her until her orgasm exploded and coursed through her in waves of pleasure, blinding her.

"Albus, Albus, yes, yes, oh, my dear Albus!" Minerva cried out, then collapsed against him, sobbing in relief and joy, utterly overwhelmed by the rush of emotion.

Albus held himself still, one arm under her legs, supporting her slightly, glad for the spell that kept Minerva from slipping to the floor. He kissed her neck softly, then her cheeks, licking up her salty tears, then tenderly placing his lips on each closed eyelid before kissing her mouth lightly. He brought his left hand around and cradled her head against him as her tears subsided.

"I love you, Minerva. I love you more than I can express." He kissed her hair.

Minerva drew in a shuddering breath then let it out in a slow sigh. "I love you, too, my sweet Albus." One hand was threaded through his beard, the other was at his back, clutching his hair. "Oh, how very much I love you!"

Albus kissed her hair once more, then asked. "A little better, then?"

Minerva looked up at him and smiled. "A lot better."

"Do you suppose we might . . . retire to the other room?" Albus asked, not wanting to rush her, but his legs feeling tired after his exertion.

Minerva nodded, and Albus withdrew, gently pulling out of her, then whispered a *Finite*, releasing her from the spell that had held her to the shower wall.

As Minerva stood and regained her footing, she reached out to touch him, still fully erect. "You didn't . . .," she said questioningly.

Albus just smiled. "I'm fine. Really." He raised an eyebrow impishly. "More for later!"

"You're sure?"

"Mmhmm." He nodded. "I think we can finish the last bit of 'cleaning up' elsewhere, don't you?"

Minerva smiled brightly, feeling better than she had in days, perhaps longer. "Yes, anywhere you like, actually."

"I have a few ideas for that," Albus answered, chuckling.

Filled with love for Albus, and with gratitude that he had known what she needed and then had so willingly and openly given it to her, Minerva wrapped her arms around him, holding onto him tightly.

"Mmm, you feel lovely and warm, Albus," she said into his beard.

"I think we will both be warmer in the bedroom, though, my dear," he answered, softly stroking her back.

Albus opened the glass door behind them, took Minerva's hand, and led her from the shower. He nodded toward the door and it opened to them.

"Show off," Minerva laughed.

"I have far more impressive things for you tonight, my dear," he answered with a teasing grin.

He released her hand to Summon their dressing gowns from the other room, then wrapped her in hers, using magic to tie the sash in a neat bow, before draping his own robe around himself. His arm around Minerva, Albus led her into the bedroom. He gestured toward the bed, and Minerva sat on the edge, waiting for him to join her. Instead, he stood in front of her, parting her knees and pulling her toward him. He sighed and closed his eyes as he held her lightly with his right arm, caressed her with his left hand, and began removing her Charmed hairpins then combing his fingers through her hair. Minerva moved her head so that he could access all of the pins. When he was through with the hairpins, he whispered a *Finite Incantatum* to release the last of the charm Minerva had used to put her hair up earlier that evening, then combed his fingers through her loose hair, still black with a few strands of white waving through it.

"I still do not know whether I prefer your hair up or down, my dear, even after all this time."

She looked up at him, eyes crinkling in a smile. "I'm glad . . ."

"I think we need to call Wilspy, love," Albus said.

She leaned against him sleepily. "And why would that be?"

"Our celebration needs a little something, I think."

"Can't you just conjure whatever it is?" Minerva asked, yawning.

"I could, but I find the bubbles suffer some."

"Mmm." Minerva was happy just to lean against Albus as he ran his fingers through her hair and gently massaged her scalp.

"Wilsy!"

The house-elf popped in, beaming to see her two Professors happy and together as they should be.

"Can I serve Professor and Professor's Professor Minerva?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes. Champagne, Wilsy. Brut," he requested, knowing Minerva's preference.

Wilsy wasted no time, but Apparated away.

"You didn't have to ask for Brut, Albus. I'll drink whatever you like," Minerva said, knowing his preference for less dry wines and champagne.

"That is what I wished us to have, my dear," Albus answered.

The champagne and two flutes arrived, settling on the bedside table, Wilsy nowhere in view. Albus Summoned his wand from his robes in the heap on the floor, then poured champagne for them both and Summoned it to them. Minerva reached out and caught a glass in each hand as Albus put his wand in his dressing gown pocket. She handed him his glass as he stepped back.

His bright blue eyes met hers and he raised his glass. "To you, my dearest Minerva, my own heart. For all that you are and all that you have given me."

"And to us, Albus. To you and me together, as it always should be."

He nodded slightly and touched his glass to hers before drinking.

Minerva sipped the champagne. "My, this *is* nice. Thank you, Albus." She smiled up at him where he still stood in front of her. "But aren't you going to join me?" she asked, patting the bed.

"For a moment, perhaps," he said and sat where she indicated.

"Just for a moment? You aren't planning on going anywhere anytime soon, are you, Albus?" Minerva looked worried.

"No, no, my dearest, I am not going anywhere for a while yet. But I do still have to finish the task at hand, you know," he said warmly.

Minerva blushed. "You already did marvellously; if you're tired "

"Not yet, my love." He kissed her cheek. "In fact, I can sleep late in the morning, if I wish. I don't have to be anywhere until lunch tomorrow. And I promise that I will hurry back, truly."

"Really? But what about classes?"

"Tomorrow is Thursday. Severus will take your sixth-year class and Remus will take the fifth-years."

"Oh. Severus and Remus. Well . . . they can't do much harm, I suppose. Although Severus . . . well, I suppose he has mastered the spells they will be practising tomorrow. Transfiguration was never his strongest subject as a student."

"I am glad you have no strong objections, my dear, since Remus will be taking all of your classes on Friday and Monday, as well."

"I am glad that you will have more time for your own work, Albus."

"I do not consider you to be work, my dear Minerva."

Minerva raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I will probably have to do *some* work during that time, but only what I can do while I am here with you, and not much of that. I cancelled my meeting at the Ministry on Monday morning they are beginning to become used to my sudden unavailability of late, anyway and arranged for Filius to take over the day-to-day operations of the school. I am sorry we are not going anywhere, my dear, but perhaps we could look at this as a little private holiday?"

Minerva smiled, delighted. "Oh, I *would* like that, Albus! If you are sure "

"I am sure, my dear. Absolutely. I will need to be away from home a lot in the coming months; I want to make the time we do have together special. And since we can sequester ourselves from the world this weekend, I thought we should avail ourselves of the opportunity. If you like, of course."

Albus smiled, seeing Minerva's evident approval written in her expression, and leaned over to kiss her. As she responded to his lips on hers, Albus let go of his champagne glass and it floated, unnoticed, to the bedside table. Catching Minerva's glass before she dropped it, he did the same with hers. Albus leaned forward more, forcing her to lie back on the bed, then covering her with his body, kissing her more deeply before sitting up and shrugging out of his robe. He winced slightly as his right hand became caught in the sleeve before he shook it free. Minerva began to sit up to help him, but he put out his left hand and pressed her back to the bed.

Albus smiled and looked at her intently, slowly pulling on one end of the sash holding her bathrobe closed. As it came loose, he moved his hand to her neck and trailed his fingers down, lightly caressing the red and pink scars on her chest, then down to her stomach, smiling when her skin jumped involuntarily at his touch and gratified to see Minerva's flush grow and her breath begin to come in quick, shallow gasps as she watched his process through eyes half open. He reached the sash and one last tug allowed the dressing gown to fall completely open.

His warm hand caressed her, breast, stomach, hip, and breast again. His blue eyes darkened as he gazed at her, his expression rapt, his lips slightly parted.

"Beautiful. So, so beautiful. The most beautiful woman, the most beautiful *anything*, I have ever seen."

Minerva opened her mouth to protest age, use, custom. But the adoring expression in his eyes stopped her, and she just smiled, then looked him up and down, and said instead, "You aren't seeing what I am, my love." She caressed his arm, the only part of him she could reach easily without moving. "Gorgeous. Wonderful. Handsome." She grinned wickedly, eyeing his erection, and added, "And very, *very* sexy."

"Flatterer," Albus said. Minerva shook her head, but he raised his right hand. "And this," he said, "I can't say this is attractive, and if you are honest, I doubt you can either."

Minerva reached toward him to touch the blackened, withered hand, and began to protest his words, but he stood and pulled away from her.

"And that is why I have a surprise for you, my dearest love." Albus called his wand to him, then said simply, *"Accio!"*

"What are you Summoning, Albus?" Minerva asked, curious.

"A little something left over from Moody's trip," he said with a grin, "and a little something else."

A small jar flew to his hand from a pocket of his discarded robes. Minerva saw the dark, lumpy potion in the glass container and let out a gasp, recognising it even in the low candlelight. "No, Albus!"

"No?" he asked, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

"No! No Polyjuice! I don't want to be with anyone but you or even you looking like anyone else, especially not Snape, not after this week."

Albus merely chuckled and silently Summoned something else from the folds of his robes. A dark purple envelope sailed toward him. With the Polyjuice Potion hovering in front of him, he removed the lid and shook the contents of the envelope into the jar.

Watching the Potion react, Minerva protested again, sitting up, "No! No, Albus, please!"

"Lie down, my dear . . . if you don't like the results, well, they wear off in an hour or so." With that, Albus drank several gulps of the noxious looking Potion.

Minerva closed her eyes and flopped back, resigned yet unable to watch, but when she heard Albus let out a groan, she opened them to see him grimacing as the Polyjuice seemed to be taking effect. He was slightly bent over, cradling his right hand in front of him, and he turned from her. Alarmed, Minerva sat up. Something must be wrong with the Potion.

"Lie back down, Minerva." Albus's words came out in gasps.

But Minerva couldn't lie back down, though she didn't move from the bed. "Albus, Albus, are you all right?" she asked, reaching out, but not touching him, fearful as the skin of his back rippled alarmingly.

He let out a rush of breath and straightened, turning back to her, smiling. "I'm fine, my dear. Just fine."

"But what's wrong? What happened? Was the Potion tainted?" She looked up at him, examining his face, but other than a few beads of sweat on his brow, any signs of his earlier distress were gone, and there seemed no change.

Albus chuckled. "You be the judge of that, my dear." He took her face between his hands and kissed her, urging her to lie back down on the bed.

As his kisses moved from her mouth to her throat, then down to her breasts, Minerva moaned. He teased her right nipple with the tip of his tongue and caressed her left breast. She opened her eyes with a sudden intake of breath.

"Albus? Your hand! Albus! What . . . ?"

He raised up off her and smiled. "I do believe you, you know, when you say you want only to be with me, Minerva." Albus reached up and caressed her face with his right hand. He sighed and said, "So lovely to touch you properly."

"But how?" Minerva asked, flabbergasted.

"A little house-elf magic. For the last two days, Wilsby has been foraging the castle and grounds for hairs that I left behind before the accident." He grinned. "Severus's mention of Shed-Stop Potion put it in my mind. Wilsby used her unique magic and her familiarity with me to find and identify my hairs. I did my own tests on them, too, of course," he added hastily, seeing Minerva's wide-eyed expression. "Wouldn't do to have a mixture of hairs, or have them shed at times too far apart. The ones that I used today were all shed within a week before the accident."

"But it looked painful, Albus."

"Polyjuice is disgusting stuff, and the transformation is never particularly comfortable. Something Moody mentioned alerted me to the fact that it might be less comfortable than usual."

"What was that?"

"He said that he ended up 'pulling a Barty Crouch,' as he put it, and sipping Polyjuice every hour that he was awake not knowing when he'd be called back, for one, but also because both gaining and losing the leg was quite painful each time the Polyjuice took effect or wore off. That prepared me for the possible discomfort." Albus chuckled. "It quite galled him, walking around looking like Severus for two days."

Minerva laughed with him, but then said, "Albus, you shouldn't have done this." She held both his hands in hers. "It's wonderful that you did, but it might affect the curse somehow, and it was clearly more than just uncomfortable."

Albus cocked his head as he looked down at her. "I did it as much for me as for you, my love. Only when I make love to you do I completely regret that injury. I cannot touch you properly, but I also have to be so careful not to knock the hand against anything or stretch it too much pain can be somewhat distracting." He flexed his fingers. "And it feels perfectly normal now." He grinned at her, a sly look in his eye. "But how do *you* think it feels, my dear, that is the real question."

He leaned on his left hand, looking down at her as he teased a nipple with his right then lightly brushed his fingers along the side of her breast, then back up to the nipple. His pupils dilated as he watched his fingers circle her breast then spiral in to its peak. Minerva was watching his face as her breath quickened.

"Very . . . good, Albus," she said between shallow breaths. She swallowed. "But you are an awful tease, you know."

"Mmmm." His lips parted and he bent and took her nipple between them, gently suckling as he flicked his tongue across it. His left arm went under her, cradling her, as his right hand teased the taut skin above her thatch of curls, barely touching it, whispers of his magic brushing her skin, drawing blood and heat throbbing down into her moist crux.

Minerva raised her hips and opened her legs, but his weight across her as he moved his mouth to her other breast kept her from moving very much. She rocked her hips, trying to encourage him to move his hand lower, but he persisted in his feather-light, maddening touches, moving now from breast to pelvis and back to her breast again.

"Oh, gods, Albus, you will drive me mad." She pressed up into his hand as it passed over the skin below her navel, but he moved with her, maintaining his light caress. She moaned with frustration and desire. Albus had just made love to her in the shower, passionately taking her, more forcefully than he had in a long time, and she had come with an explosion, yet here she was, hungering for him again, afire under the touch of his lips, tongue, and fingertips. Even the light brushing of his beard on her skin excited her. Her breathing became heavier, and she tried to reach around to touch him, find his hard cock, but he kept her trapped beneath him as he teased her.

Albus began to kiss and lick his way down her body from her breast to her navel, pausing occasionally to nip or suck her skin, marking his trail as he went. His right hand played in her dark curls, tantalisingly close to her now swollen clitoris, but as his mouth began its path across her lower stomach, his fingers found her inner thighs and he teased Minerva there just as he had done above. His mouth was now at the hollow of her hip, nipping lightly as his fingers brushed her rounded thighs, coming close to her crux, but never touching where she needed him most.

He paused to look up at her flushed face. "You are mine, Minerva," he whispered, "and I am yours. I am yours forever." He kissed her stomach lightly.

And now he was pulling away, freeing his arm from beneath her as he moved further down her body and off the bed. Now his lips were on her thighs, kissing and suckling, as he knelt between her legs, one hand on each knee, spreading them wider. Minerva moaned as his hands travelled up her legs and his thumbs suddenly entered her

from either side, then pulled out as his tongue finally found its way to her clit and licked it lightly, teasingly, before he began massaging her damp folds with one hand and penetrating her entrance with the fingers of his other hand, angling up and finding her sweet spot on the first thrust. Albus hummed with satisfaction at her reaction and bent forward to lick her once more. This time Albus did not stop. He thrust, massaged, licked, and suckled. His fingers and his tongue worked in concert to bring her greatest pleasure he was able to give. Minerva gasped and panted and called his name, insensible to anything but his touch and his presence.

Then she was filled with fire and light as intense pleasure drove through her in waves, and she came with a gush of sweet nectar as Albus continued to lick and suckle until she was spent and limp.

"Albus, Albus, my sweet Albus," she murmured, moving her hand to find his head and touch him. "How do you do that to me, Albus?" Minerva smiled as he joined her on the bed and curled up beside her, pulling her into his embrace.

Albus stroked her skin, dewy with perspiration, but said nothing, only kissing her forehead and sighing as he relaxed with her in his arms. Minerva snuggled against him, but after resting only a few moments, her hand drifted down to his erection. She smiled as she felt its heaviness in her hand and tilted her head to look at him. His eyes were closed and his face more relaxed than she had seen it in months.

Minerva began to run her thumb over the head of his cock as a prelude to more, but Albus kissed her, and murmured, "Not yet, my love."

He opened his eyes and looked into hers. "Let's wait until the potion wears off, hmm? And in the meantime, I think I would like to hold you and drink champagne and luxuriate in the wonderful peace I find in your arms."

"Mmm. That sounds like a nice idea," Minerva said, wrapping a leg around him and scooting further up on the bed.

They lay entangled like that for quite a while, despite Albus's professed desire to drink champagne. He ran his fingers through her hair and over her back and began to softly hum an air as he caressed her. Minerva's eyes filled with tears. She didn't know why . . . she just loved him so, and it was so wonderful to lie there in his arms and wrap herself around him. She wished they could stay like that forever.

First blinking away her tears, Minerva lifted her head from Albus's shoulder and looked at his face. He opened his eyes and smiled at her, caressing her cheek and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"What of that champagne, Albus?" Even in a Charmed bottle, it would eventually go flat.

He nodded. "All right, my dear," he said, kissing her softly before releasing her to get the champagne.

As she poured the champagne, trying to pay attention to what she was doing and not to the bobbing of Albus's erection as he moved to sit against the head of the bed, she asked, "How long has it been now, Albus?"

"Hmm? Oh, you mean the Polyjuice? Almost an hour now," he answered.

"There's a bit left in this jar . . . you could take it, if you want . . . it's up to you, of course. But if the retransformation is going to be painful, well, you could put it off, and not waste the extra Potion, too, if you want. It looks like enough for a couple more hours, anyway." She didn't want to seem as though she were pressuring him, especially since she had earlier expressed concerns about using the Polyjuice at all. But it was nice to be able to hold him and not worry whether she was putting pressure on his hand, possibly hurting him inadvertently not to mention that they had both enjoyed his having the use of it back.

"I didn't think you approved, Minerva," Albus said with a teasing grin.

"Well, it's done already, isn't it? It could hardly hurt to take a bit more now could it?"

"No, I don't think so. Bring it here. I'll wash it down with a little champagne."

Grimacing from the taste, Albus downed more of the Potion, and, after swallowing several times, he followed it with a glass of champagne, drinking all of it to rid himself of the taste of Polyjuice, then held out his glass.

"Is there more?" he asked hopefully.

Minerva laughed and brought the bottle over the bed, sat next to him, her hip touching his, and poured him another glass, before sipping from her own. They sat and chatted, Albus telling Minerva more about what he had done that evening after he'd left her, including his visit with Severus.

"Hmm. So Hermione was leaving when you arrived?" Minerva wore an amused expression.

"Yes, looking quite dejected the girl's rather a good actress for a Gryffindor."

Minerva's lips twitched. "And what was it Severus said to you, exactly, about his farewell?"

"That he wished her to enjoy her chocolates before bidding her a fond adieu!" Albus smiled at that himself.

"And she winked and grinned, he said?"

"That's what he reported. He was somewhat irritated with me at the time, but I don't believe he made it up for my benefit."

"No, I rather think he didn't." Minerva chuckled. "Well, he had told me that he gave her a box of chocolates." She shook her head, smiling. "Oh, my. And then, when he's back to being himself, he tells her he hopes she enjoys them presumably sincerely, and not sarcastically. The silly wizard."

"What do you mean, Minerva? I thought you would be happy to have Severus . . . well, showing a softer side occasionally. In the right company, anyway."

"Oh, I am. But . . ." Minerva sighed, trying to think of how to explain this to a mere man. "You know how Severus usually is, especially around Gryffindors. Snarky, I think the students call him. Or a nasty bastard, as he calls himself. He's mysterious, intelligent, generally unpleasant, but occasionally quite brave, and certainly unattainable . . . and then he tells Hermione that he hopes she enjoys her chocolates. You do see, don't you, Albus?" At his blank expression, Minerva rolled her eyes. "Hermione was on the verge of a crush as it was, if you hadn't noticed. Halfway there, anyway. And after he asked her to fetch the sweets for him, I understand that she was oh, how did Severus describe her? Rather brilliant? in helping him, and no doubt she felt even closer to him since they were in cahoots. But she knew that he was being affected by the spell the entire time. Now, however, even a usually sensible witch like Hermione . . . well, when this mysterious, unattainable, and normally nasty wizard tells her he hopes she enjoys her chocolates and then puts up with it when she winks at him . . . the poor girl. And poor Severus. I doubt he has any idea . . . Her crush no doubt has settled in quite well now. Hard enough for her to have a crush on a teacher, but then to have that teacher be Severus . . . I'm sure that Hermione has sense enough not to try to have more contact with him than can reasonably be explained, but the poor girl," Minerva repeated, but although she was shaking her head, she was smiling. "If a bright Gryffindor can have a crush on him now, then perhaps Severus will have a life after all this is over, despite his gloomy prognostications!"

"Perhaps . . .," Albus said softly as he sent his glass over to the night stand. He sighed. "Perhaps . . ."

"You look as though you hold as little hope as he does, Albus," Minerva said, frowning her brow.

"No, no, my dear. I do hold hope for him and for his future, but there will be, without doubt, a great deal of pain for him on the way there. I do hope he makes it through, though, and I believe my hope is not a vain one."

Minerva placed her glass on the bedside table and sighed, resting her head on Albus's shoulder. "What is that Chinese curse, Albus? May you live in interesting times? I would say our times have been very interesting, indeed . . ."

"But worthwhile, Minerva." He kissed her forehead. "Better than to hide our heads in the sand, after all is said and done."

"Yes. You are right, of course." Minerva looked at him closely. "But don't you ever wish . . . well, that things might have been different?" She wanted to add "for us," but didn't, not wanting him to feel badly.

"Naturally, sometimes. But there is no point in dwelling on what was and what can't be changed." He sighed. "And I cannot change all that I must do in the future, either . . . but I can work to make the most of our time together. And I hope that I have done that, especially in those rare times that were somewhat less interesting. I am sorry if I have ever left you feeling neglected, my love."

Minerva leaned into his caress. "You are right, of course, about regret and the folly of dwelling in the past and wishing for what might have been. But you mustn't feel that you neglected me. You never did. You never shirked your duties, as you saw them, and I would not have wanted you to. But when you were here, when you *are* here, I never feel neglected at all. Not that we haven't had our share of misunderstandings and miscommunications, of course." Minerva smiled at him. "But you never neglected me. You are a man with great responsibilities; I have always understood that. It's not as though you were whiling away your time following the Quidditch teams all over the country, or staying out late and carousing, or whatever it is husbands do who neglect their wives. You never even buried yourself in your work to escape me, as I understand some wizards are wont to do. No, you never let me feel neglected; even when I missed you terribly, I did not feel neglected." She paused, then admitted, "Jealous sometimes, of the wizarding world you were busy devotedly serving, if I am honest about it, but never neglected by you."

"Good, I am glad," Albus said softly, wrapping his arms around her. He kissed her and let out a long, slow breath. "I worry sometimes, and even feel guilty, about all of the times I have had to leave you and all that you have had to bear because you are with me. Particularly recently . . ."

"Don't. Don't ever feel guilty, Albus. I have told you that before. I chose to be with you, and when I chose to be with you, I knew who you were and what that would mean. I can't say I don't wish that times hadn't been different, but they were what they were."

"I always tried not to hold you too tightly, to let you always make another choice "

"There is no other choice for me, Albus. Surely after all these years, you see that?" Minerva turned her face to look into his eyes.

"Yes," Albus whispered. "Yes, I do see that, though even after all this time, I marvel at it." He kissed her, gently moving his lips on hers. "Mmm. So blessed . . .," he murmured against her.

Minerva moved to sit across his legs as he continued to kiss and caress her. She wound her fingers through his hair, pulling him toward her, trying to get even closer. His erection pressed against her leg as his desire for her grew, and she reached down to stroke him and caress him, her own excitement growing as she felt him twitch in her hand. Running her thumb across his head, she spread his moisture, and he moaned into her mouth.

Albus slipped his hand under her robe and began to tug it off of her. He drew back and smiled at her, breathing heavily. "You are wearing too much, my dear."

Minerva shrugged off her dressing gown, helping him remove it completely. Albus pushed her from his lap, never breaking off his kisses and caresses, turning her onto her back and lying on top of her. As he held her, kissing her and fondling one breast, she moaned and reached between them to find him again, then stroked him a few times before he pressed himself flat against her, trapping her hand where it was, still grasping his cock, but unable to do more than gently squeeze it rhythmically.

It surprised her when he suddenly pushed himself off of her, raising up on one arm, but then she saw him reach out his hand and Summon the remaining Polyjuice. Minerva watched as Albus drank off the dregs of the potion, making a slight grimace as he finished.

He dropped the jar to the bed and it rolled to the floor as he began kissing Minerva's neck and chest, then moved to her breasts, suckling one as he rolled her other nipple between the fingers of his right hand. Albus shifted and reached between them to touch her, sliding his hand between her legs, then inserting a finger and withdrawing it. He rose up again to look down at her face, taking pleasure in her flush and her glazed eyes, then he brought his finger to his mouth and licked it clean.

"Mmm. Tastes very, very nice," he said hoarsely. "Still so ready for me . . ."

"Always," Minerva answered.

"So," Albus whispered, "are you ready for the final phase of your bathing, my dear?"

Her lips twitched a smile. "I believe I may be . . . I think I rather need another good scrubbing in there, you know . . . followed by a special rinse . . ."

Albus kissed her mouth, this time running his tongue along hers, then flicking the tip of his tongue against the tip of hers. He pulled back again to look in his wife's eyes. She saw humour, warmth, and desire in his gaze.

"I think I can provide a 'special rinse,' my dear, if that is what you would like."

"Mhm," Minerva's reply was swallowed by another kiss, this one growing in passion.

She felt Albus's hips rise off of her and one hand urging her legs to part further, then his finger was on her clitoris and she felt the head of his penis at her entrance. But he didn't thrust, and merely moved enough to gently stimulate her, stroking from her opening to her clitoris and back again. Minerva's breath grew ragged and she pulled from his kiss, gasping.

"Oh, Albus, gods."

"Must finish properly, my love," came his passion-roughened voice in her ear, as he continued to stimulate her with his head and shaft, still not entering her.

Minerva raised her hips, frustrated, her clit throbbing, excited by his cock's tantalising massage. And still he rubbed himself against her, slipping against her folds as she grew even wetter. Finally, Albus slid into her, and she gasped, but then he pulled out completely, two fingers gently squeezing her clit between them as he maddeningly entered, then pulled out, entered, pulled out, entered, pulled out, teasing and exciting her, the head of his cock stretching her and stimulating her nub with each stroke, and every time he delved deeper, and her gasps came in rhythm with his thrusts, until finally he withdrew no more, but drove in deeply, burying himself completely in her vagina. He paused and rose up to look at her, supporting himself with one hand as the other rested in its ministrations to her engorged nub.

Even after all their years together, the look of love, adoration, passion, and desire in Albus's eyes caused Minerva's breath to catch in her throat.

"I love you, Albus, I love you so much . . ." The words seemed inadequate, but she was incapable of finding any others at that moment.

Albus breathed out in a rush and answered, "You are my love, my sweetest one, my heart." He kissed her. "You are my heart . . . I love you always. My heart. Forever my heart. Forever."

As Albus spoke, he began to rock his hips, and he watched Minerva's face as he moved within her, then he shifted one leg outside of hers and urged her legs closer together until he rested with one leg on hers and the other beside her, his hard cock pressed between her legs as he withdrew and reentered, thrusting over and over again. Minerva tightened herself around him rhythmically as he thrust, and she saw his eyes widen with the first squeeze of her walls around his shaft.

"Forever, forever, forever, my love," he breathed as he moved in and out of her, gazing on her face, looking into her eyes, seeing them become glassier and more

unfocussed as her orgasm grew near. "Forever, forever, forever," his words a mantra in rhythm with his erection as he stroked in and out.

Albus continued to murmur to her and to hold off his own release until he brought Minerva to hers. The sensation of her warm core tightening around his cock brought him almost unbearably close to the brink as he gazed down at her. And then it came, and he felt Minerva shudder beneath him as she clenched around his shaft, her orgasm pulsing against him.

As surges of pleasure rushed over her, Minerva cried out inarticulately, only two words clear, "Albus, Albus, my Albus! Albus . . . my Albus, my . . . my Albus!"

As Minerva continued to come around him, Albus drove in faster and harder, supporting himself with his left arm while his right hand gripped Minerva's shoulder, and, holding himself back no more, the heaviness, heat, and throbbing grew until his long-suppressed orgasm burst forth, a massive explosion of passion running through him, into her, bringing them to joined rapture as his magic rippled in unison with his ecstatic release.

"Minerva! Minerva!" His rough cry came in her ear, and his emotion and ecstasy seemed to prolong her own orgasm, as the ripples of pleasure continued to pass through her. "Oh, Minerva, Minerva, oh, my Minerva . . ." Albus gasped and cried, shuddering, pressing himself into her as her hands grasped at his lower back, pulling him toward her with an almost bruising grip.

When he was spent, he collapsed on top of her, covering her entirely, his face buried in her hair. Minerva's arms were around him, holding him to her, relishing his weight, one hand stroking his back gently and running her fingers through the ends of his hair, the other cupping his buttocks. Finally, as his breathing slowed and his heartbeat resumed its normal pace, Albus raised his head.

"I adore you, Minerva McGonagall. I adore you." His voice was hoarse from exertion and passion.

Minerva brought her hand to his face and gently wiped away the mix of sweat and tears. "And I adore you, Albus." Looking into his eyes, she said softly, "And, whatever you may think of it, I am yours."

He kissed her cheek. "And I am yours. Always. You hold my heart."

"As you have held mine. Forever, Albus."

"Forever. Forever," he whispered.

They lay there a while longer before Albus rolled off of her, lying on his back, his left arm partially beneath her, his right hand thrown above his head. Minerva watched as he relaxed beside her, breathing evenly and deeply. She felt she would never tire of his face. And he looked so peaceful . . . so happy. She sighed. His troubles seemed to weigh on him more and more lately, yet he would not share them all with her, always saying "later," "not yet," "better not now" . . . and Minerva worried that "later" might become "too late." She squelched that thought, banishing it with a kiss to her husband's cheek. She had thought him asleep, but his eyes opened.

Albus smiled. "Watching me, hmm? Caught you!"

It was an old joke from the early days of their courtship, when Minerva worried that everyone would see how she looked at him, and how, when they were alone, she couldn't help watching him and would tear her eyes away, embarrassed, when he caught her staring. Finally, he made a joke of it, and then confessed to having the same trouble . . . wanting to look at nothing but her whenever she was in the same room with him.

Minerva laughed and kissed him properly. "Mmm. A witch can't cast any secret glances at her husband? Or cast glances at her secret husband?"

Albus chuckled, himself, then sat up. "I should use the bathroom now the Potion will be wearing off soon."

"All right but you needn't stay in there for that. I will be fine with it, now that I am prepared."

"I know, but . . ." He hesitated.

"But?" Minerva prodded.

"Alastor said that the reversion was worse . . ."

"All the more reason you should be in here, comfortable with me, not in the hard, cold bathroom." Never mind that the bathroom was kept at a constant temperature; it was stark and barren.

Albus nodded, acquiescing. "The loo, then, quickly, and I will be back."

Minerva listened to him through the partially opened door as he used the loo and washed his hands. He hummed to himself, not the sweet melody from his childhood that he had hummed to her earlier, but something else, something sadder, beautiful, but tinged with melancholy . . . as she listened, she recognised it. Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, the *Agnus Dei*. Albus had always claimed it to be his favourite piece of music, and although to some, its sadness may have seemed an unlikely contrast to his normally cheerful, optimistic, and light nature, Minerva knew that Albus's spirit was filled with notes of both great joy and great sorrow.

Minerva's eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them away, swallowing and calming herself for his return. She would not allow melancholy into this room, not now, not again. This would be their haven away from the world, and she would not burden him with her worries for him or with her sadness. Comfort she could provide, and comfort she would give him.

Albus returned to her, a smile on his face, eyes twinkling. "Always a pleasure to see you, my dear . . . particularly dressed as you are."

"Don't be cheeky," Minerva answered, smiling, "or I will get dressed. One of my old lady nighties with a high neck, long sleeves, and too much fabric." While he had snagged his dressing gown on the way to the loo and had donned it, Minerva was still lying naked on the bed.

"Heavens, no, we can't have that." He sat down beside her and looked at his wand hand. "It won't be long now, I think."

"Mm, come here, love, lie down beside me. I will hold you." Minerva patted the bed.

Minerva Summoned the small pillow they used at night to cushion his hand. Instead of having Albus lying on her right as he usually did, though, she had him lie on his left side in front of her. She placed the pillow in front of him, and held him from behind, encircling him with her arms, pressed tightly against his back, her right leg thrown over his, completing the embrace.

"All right, now, Albus?" Minerva asked.

"Very. Quite comfortable. For the moment," he answered.

They lay there a while, Minerva occasionally pressing her lips to his shoulders, unable to resist kissing him when he was so close to her. Then Albus stiffened and let out a guttural sigh, biting back a moan.

"It's all right, love, it's all right . . . yell, if you want to. No one will hear. It's all right." She renewed her grip on him as she felt his skin and muscle writhing.

"Aaaah-ah . . . ohhh." His breath came in gasping moans as she felt him press his head into his pillow.

She wished she could bear his pain for him, but she swallowed her own tears. "I am here," she whispered.

Albus uttered a sharp cry as his arm jerked up off the small pillow of its own accord. Minerva caught it and held on, careful to avoid touching him anywhere near his cursed hand. His breath was coming in laboured gasps. Minerva winced as his hand blackened and withered with a crunching sound. Then, suddenly, it was over, and she heard Albus sigh beside her as his hand settled on its cushion. She held him still, pressing gentle kisses to his back and shoulders.

After a few moments, Albus stretched and turned in her arms. He looked tired, and his face was damp with perspiration, but his eyes were bright. "That was a lovely treat, my dearest," he said, kissing her nose. "Marvellous."

"Yes, yes, it was," she agreed, nodding, not wanting him to have any thought that she had not enjoyed and appreciated what he had done for her, though thinking that it was purchased at too heavy a price. She kissed his cheek. "But it seemed . . . an expensive treat."

He shook his head. "No, not at all. I am fine now. And it was but a moment of discomfort gladly traded for the ecstasy we shared."

Minerva smiled and kissed his lips lightly. "It was wonderful, Albus. Thank you. But your hand, how is it?"

She sat up carefully, aware that his hand was nestled between them.

"No worse than it was, I believe." Albus rolled onto his back and let his sleeve fall back to his elbow as he gingerly held up his hand. "Yes, the same. No further along than it was."

Minerva scrutinized his wrist and lower arm where the shrivelled flesh faded from charcoal black to grey and then to its normal hue and healthy tone. No, it didn't look as though the curse had spread or been revitalised by the Polyjuice Potion or his reversion to his current form. She kissed his inner arm where the grey skin met milky white.

"Now, I think I need to use the loo and clean up a bit, myself. I won't be but a minute," she said.

"Need any help, my dear?" Albus asked with a naughty look in his eye.

"Hmpf. I think you were *quite* thorough earlier for the time being, anyway and both of us would benefit from some rest now." She pecked his cheek as she got up and went into the bathroom, not bothering with a robe.

When she came back five minutes later, Albus was lying supine on his usual side of the bed, eyes closed. He had removed his dressing gown and covered himself with the sheet, but it didn't look as though he had bothered retrieving a nightshirt for himself. Well, if he weren't bothering with it, neither would she, and she slipped between the sheets. Minerva smiled as Albus turned and put his arm around her, his hand coming to rest on the small pillow on her other side.

She doused the candles, then said, "Good night, Albus. Sweet dreams."

"Mmm. They are always sweet when you are here with me, Minerva, my love. Good night . . . sleep well," he murmured, already half asleep himself, but kissing the back of her head.

"I love you, Albus Dumbledore," she whispered. "I love you forever and always . . ."

Note: This chapter grew, so I decided to divide it into two for your enjoyment. There is now one more chapter and an epilogue to go. I hope you enjoyed this installment!

Fourteen: Morning Delights

Chapter 14 of 16

Albus and Minerva spend an active – and playful – morning.

Note: This chapter contains description of a lot of vigorous, playful sexual activity that may not be to the taste of every reader.



Chapter Fourteen: Morning Delights

Minerva woke at her usual hour the next morning. She smiled as she looked at her husband's face on the pillow beside her. She brushed his hair back. Despite having risen in the night, he apparently had forgotten the charm he used to keep his hair and beard from tangling as he slept. He was lying, half-sprawled, his shoulders and upper chest bared, his injured hand resting outside the sheet on his stomach, his mouth slightly open but, fortunately, not snoring, and he seemed to be dreaming.

Minerva watched Albus sleep for a while longer; when he turned his head toward her and sighed, she thought he was waking, but he didn't. She should let him sleep . . . but they did have the rest of the morning . . . and they could nap in the afternoon. The corners of her mouth twitched at the thought of what she would like to do just then, how she would like to wake him. Finally, she gave in and reached for him tentatively beneath the sheet. Her hand lightly traced the line of sparse hairs from his navel downward and found what it was seeking. Already firm to the palm she brushed over him, she gently teased his morning erection, trying to stimulate him without waking him. His cock jumped against her hand, and his eyes moved beneath his lids as his breath quickened, his dream perhaps taking an interesting and unexpected turn. She loved the feel of him in her hand, full and heavy, his hardening shaft encased in the softest skin. Minerva explored and found the head of his cock, tender beneath her fingertips. It always seemed the most naked part of him, when he was large and erect, the crown emerging and pushing his foreskin back, naked and vulnerable. And so sensitive . . . Minerva gingerly lifted the sheet covering them, careful not to disturb Albus's hand, and edged her way under it, hoping not to wake him.

The room had been only dimly lit from the morning light leaking in through the closed draperies; beneath the sheet, Minerva could barely make out Albus's form. But she didn't need to be able to see for what she had in mind. She smiled and her pulse quickened as she thought of how she was going to awaken her lover. It had been a very,

very long time since she had woken him in quite this particular way.

Minerva was glad Albus was lying half on his back, his left knee bent, right leg straight; her searching fingers easily found his soft sack. Minerva held him gently cupped in her hand as she approached him beneath the sheets. He smelled still of the almond soap he must have used before returning to bed the night before. A delicate approach was called for, she thought. Her tongue went out and touched him experimentally, just the briefest, lightest flick to the edge of his crown. Minerva smiled when his penis twitched. The tip of her tongue met the tip of his cock. Albus would awaken soon . . . she swirled her tongue around the head, then gently closed her lips around him. She drew her lips over his head, sucking slightly, and she felt Albus shift beside her and waken with a gasped breath. She kissed the tip, licked it again, then ran her tongue down his length and back up again. As her mouth closed around the head of his cock, Minerva heard a gratifying moan come from him.

His left hand came down to grip her shoulder through the sheet just as she lowered herself on him, pressing against his shaft with her tongue, bringing his head all the way to the back of her throat before rising up again. Minerva repeated this several times, each time ending by swirling her tongue around the crown of his shaft before diving back down again.

Albus moaned, then he whispered, almost gasping, "Gods, Minerva! You just . . . you just . . ." But her attentions grew more intense, and he found no words, but only moaned and gripped her shoulder harder.

Minerva felt his balls, cupped in her hand, begin to retract slightly, and she lowered herself completely, stroking his shaft with her tongue and swallowing around his crown.

"Oh, Minerva wait too soon want to aaah, Minerva!"

Minerva paid his words no heed, attending only to his penis, and then he came, and she swallowed again and again around his climax, finally stilling and gently withdrawing from around him. She kissed his penis very lightly, and then, still gently cupping his balls, she kissed his stomach, then his chest, planting soft kisses all of the way up his body until her head emerged from beneath the sheet.

"Good morning, Albus!" she said brightly, smiling.

Albus ran his fingers through her hair. "Good morning to you, my little minx," he said teasingly. "That was a very effective awakening, I would say."

Minerva laid her head on his chest, brushing her cheek against his beard. "I would *hope* you wouldn't sleep through the whole thing . . . very disappointed I would be if you did!" she said with a laugh.

"You should have stopped, though, Minerva, so that I could . . . share the pleasure."

She shook her head against him. "I enjoyed doing it. And that almond soap you used last night lent a rather interesting flavour to the process."

He could feel her smile. "Hmm. I will have to remember that. But still, I don't want to leave you wanting."

"I am fine, Albus. Last night was very satisfying." She lifted her head to look at him, her eyes smiling warmly. "Thank you, Albus. Thank you. I barely even remember why I was . . . upset, before, and I can't conjure up whatever it was that I was feeling at all. I feel rejuvenated and very blessed. So, thank you."

Albus caressed her cheek. "It was all that I could do . . . I love you so very much, Minerva, and seeing you like that last night, and knowing that I was partly to blame hush, now, I don't mean that the way you probably are thinking, my dear you were right yesterday: I could have worked on a solution day and night for five days without ceasing, and I would not have found one. The only solution was the one that you possessed. No, I was partly to blame because I should have come to you sooner. I should have held you immediately, kissed you as soon as you emerged, reassured you of how wonderful you are, and how generous and loving you were with Severus, and how good, and how very proud I am of you. I love you, my dearest Minerva, and I hurt you when I should have helped you. I am so sorry."

Minerva moved up the bed and kissed his cheek before settling back down with her arms around him and her head resting on his chest. "You did not mean to, Albus. I understand that. You did not know what to do or say, and you were worried and nervous, yourself. Perhaps it would have helped if you had been here when I came out looking for you, and certainly some of my worries would have been allayed, but I think that my primary feelings would have remained. I still would have needed you last night, Albus, needed you to help me to come back to myself and to you . . . to us. What I did over the last few days . . . as hard as it may have been at the time, it was harder once it was over, somehow. But you were perfect last night, Albus; you gave me exactly what I needed, all that I needed. And now, I feel whole again, complete."

"I am glad of it, my dear love," Albus said softly. He played with the ends of her hair. "I think that I . . . I feel better, myself. Settled, in a way."

Minerva sighed, her head on his chest, and closed her eyes blissfully, listening to Albus's heart.

They lay there quietly for a while, then Minerva stretched and yawned. "I think I need breakfast, Albus."

"That sounds like a good idea, my dear. Should we eat here or in the other room?"

"What about a cup of tea here, then breakfast in the sitting room at the table?" Minerva suggested.

"Perfect." He kissed the top of her head. "Do you mind if I use the loo and you call Wispy?"

"Mmm. That's fine."

On his way into the bathroom, Albus tossed Minerva her dressing gown. "For Wilspy," he said with a smile. "If you would care to remove it later, I will have no objections!"

Minerva laughed, then got up, opened the draperies, and wrapped the robe around her, looking down at her chest with some surprise. Shrugging, she called Wilspy and requested tea to be served in the bedroom and asking that she leave breakfast in the sitting room with a freshness charm so they could eat whenever they were ready.

When Albus reemerged from the bathroom, Minerva looked at him with mock annoyance.

"Now I know why you wanted me to cover up!" She stood in front of him and opened her robe: in the clear light of day, a trail of small red and purple marks could be seen stretching from her collar bone to her pelvis, a meandering path of love bites.

Albus raised his eyebrows, clearly taken aback, not having seen them in the half-light. "I'm sorry I really didn't realise . . . so many."

He hesitated, unsure whether Minerva were really upset with him. "Do they hurt? I wouldn't want to hurt you." He had never left so many marks on her before . . . one or two, perhaps, and that rarely. Even when he made love to her with some force and energy behind their coupling, as he had the night before, he never wanted to hurt her.

"Oh, come here, Albus. I'm just teasing you I was surprised, though. And no, they don't hurt at all." She stood, grabbed him around the middle, and held him tightly. "When you *do* finally say, 'mine,' you really mean it, though, don't you?" she said, smiling up at him.

"You know how I feel, Minerva," Albus said softly.

"I know, love. I know." Minerva looked into his eyes, thinking of his fears about the power he could exercise over her and his distaste for the thought of one person possessing another. "You shouldn't be so cautious, so afraid of it," she said, caressing his face. "I have no fear for you or of you. I trust myself with you completely."

Albus twitched a slight, rueful smile. "Even after yesterday? When I left you here alone?"

"You returned. You returned, Albus. No one should expect perfection, from themselves or from anyone else. But you are perfect for me. And I am yours."

Albus bent his head and kissed his Minerva softly, then softly again, then once more with greater energy, continuing to kiss her with growing passion and need. Minerva responded, keeping pace with him, loving the sensation of his growing desire for her and the ripples of his magic against hers.

When his kisses moved to her neck and shoulders, Minerva said, gasping into his ear, "There's tea . . . you wanted . . . your . . . tea . . ."

His only response was, "Mmmm," and he continued his kissing and nibbling, stepping forward, pushing Minerva toward the bed.

"Need you. Want you," Albus said, his voice hoarse and breathy. "Now. Oh, now, Minerva, my dearest Minerva, my sweet delight."

Minerva felt the bed hit the back of her legs, and Albus followed her as he pushed her down onto the sheets, never lifting his mouth from her skin. And now he was kissing and licking all of the little marks he'd made the night before, sucking them gently again, then licking them before blowing a whispery breath over them. When he reached the cleft between her breasts, he took a detour, first to her left nipple, swirling a tongue around the aureola, then licking and suckling the nipple, and then moving to her right breast, again laving it before sucking its rosy peak. As Albus progressed, Minerva's breath grew faster and more shallow, and as he attended to her breasts, taking his pleasure in their feel against his tongue and between his lips, Minerva moaned her appreciation. His attentions were drawing a throbbing heat into her vagina, and her clitoris grew with her desire. She spread her legs and pressed her warm wetness against him, and was gratified when Albus moved his torso to massage her there, his beard rubbing against her, as he suckled still at her nipples before returning to the path that he had marked the night before.

His lips sucked the small purple and red signs of his ardour of the previous night, and Minerva could feel tingles of his magic as he licked them then breathed upon them, moving further down, following the path they marked, on the way to his final target. When he reached her pelvis, lingering there with feathery strokes of his tongue, Minerva raised her hips, urging him onward. Albus lay his head on her stomach and touched her with his left index finger, just stroking her clit with the one finger, allowing the tip of his finger to slip into her entry before pulling it out and up and dragging it across her clitoris once more. After stroking against her clitoris a few more times in that same manner, down to her entry then back up, watching his finger as it made the circuit of clitoris to vagina and back again, he tried the same again with two fingers. His breath was warm on Minerva's skin, and she moaned again, and rocked her hips.

In answer to her need, he lowered himself further, pleasuring her with his tongue a moment, flicking up and down, then back and forth, until with a groan, he raised himself above her and said, "I need you now, I need you now . . . my sweet, my sweet, my sweet delight . . ."

Albus pushed Minerva further up the bed and looked into her eyes, an intense concentration on his face, and he settled himself between her legs, the head of his cock pressing against her. His breathing was deep and ragged, and he drove his penis home into her. Minerva arched involuntarily and her legs went around him; Albus murmured a spell and Minerva felt herself rise up off the bed, only her head and shoulders still resting on the mattress, as Albus, kneeling now, pulled back and thrust again. At Minerva's moan, he smiled and thrust again and again, repeatedly pulling out and pushing in, pistoning within her, each thrust eliciting another inarticulate moan of pleasure.

"Minerva, Minerva, come for me . . . come, come . . . I'm coming, Minerva!" And Albus thrust faster and harder; Minerva cried out his name as she came with a rush, and Albus let go, his eyes closed and his cock buried deep within her, releasing as waves of her orgasm surrounded him.

When he had spent himself in her, Albus held onto Minerva and sat back on his heels, pulling her from her Charmed support and resting her on his folded legs, but not withdrawing from her or allowing her to slip free. He looked down and smiled.

"That was rather nicer than tea, don't you think, my sweet delight?" he asked, a twinkle in his eye.

"Very much. You are very much more satisfying than even the best cup of tea, Albus. But you know, I think I would rather like to sit up and kiss you, but I believe I need a bit of assistance . . . don't want to . . . dislodge anything, now!" Minerva said with a slightly naughty grin.

Albus reached down and, using a combination of magic and his left hand, raised Minerva into a sitting position. Without a pause, he kissed her mouth, gently and lovingly.

When they finally broke their kiss and Minerva lay her head on his shoulder, Albus said, "You are the most beautiful woman in the world . . . the most beautiful of all creation." He added, feeling her head move in scepticism, "The most beautiful in my eyes. The most beautiful and most sensual. And my beloved." He ended with a whisper, saying her name, and Minerva sighed happily.

"Being with you, in any and every way, is what gives me life and not mere survival, Albus. You always raise me to the highest heights, no matter what we're doing . . . most obviously when we are making love as we just did."

"I am afraid I may have been a bit . . . eager this time," Albus said apologetically.

"And I didn't mind at all. I like it when you're eager. You make me feel . . . desirable as you always do but it's different when you are, as you put it, eager." Minerva smiled against him. "I love this time together, the time after, you know. Just as much as when we're in the midst of our love-making, I think."

"Mmm, I do, too," Albus said, nuzzling her ear. "And this particular position is really rather nice . . . although, not being as limber as I once was, you may need to unfold me when you get up," he joked.

Minerva chuckled. "I would be happy to help. And if you need any after-care, I'd be happy to tend to that, too!"

They remained like that for a while, until finally, Minerva said, "I am afraid that Nature does not respect my desire to remain here in your embrace forever." She leaned back, looked into Albus's eyes, and smiled. "I am afraid that, first, a trip to the loo is in order, and then I really do need my breakfast."

Albus kissed her nose. "Mmm, Nature is also interfering with my enjoyment of the moment, though not in quite the same way I do believe I have no circulation to my feet!" He chuckled.

Minerva moved off of him, feeling, with some regret, him slip from within her. Good to her word, she helped Albus "unfold," then rubbed his calves vigorously before making her trip to the loo. Not precisely the "after-care" she'd been thinking of, but certainly welcome in restoring his circulation.

After taking care of her morning routine, Minerva joined Albus in the sitting room, where he was sitting reading the *Prophet*. He had poured his tea, but had not begun breakfast yet. When she emerged from the bedroom, he put the newspaper down and used his wand to fix her cup of tea.

"Good morning, my dearest!" he greeted her, as though they hadn't just spent the last hour and a half enjoying the morning together.

Minerva laughed lightly and kissed his cheek before replying, "It is a very good morning! Thank you for waiting, but you didn't have to."

"Of course I didn't, but it was you who was hungry about an hour ago, and I who kept you from your breakfast!"

"Was it really? Hmm, I do remember some kind of distraction that prevented me from " Minerva laughed as he playfully lobbed a breakfast roll at her, and she caught it.

"I can see I shall have to work harder in the future! 'Some kind of distraction,' indeed!" he grumped, a poorly suppressed grin on his face.

They talked and ate their breakfast, then read the newspaper, sharing interesting or ridiculous tidbits with each other. Minerva put down the paper and smiled happily at Albus from across the table.

"This is wonderful! I am so glad we're able to do this! Thank you, Albus."

Albus returned her smile. "I am glad, as well. I wish we could begin every day this way, my dear with or without the early morning 'distraction.' I am sorry we cannot." He immediately wished he had not added anything to his agreement. Minerva knew well enough that such mornings were rare; he needn't have reminded her. He could see and feel her light mood fade.

"Yes . . . of course. And I know you are." She took a deep breath and let it out before continuing. "Well, I don't believe I need another shower just yet, but perhaps I should get dressed. Especially if Poppy will be coming for lunch. Did you speak to her about it, Albus?"

"Yes, briefly, when I went to supposedly visit you in the infirmary. It was the last visit I made before returning here last night, actually. I wanted to make sure that the rest of my plans would work out before I asked her. So, unless there is an emergency, she will meet me in my office at a quarter to twelve and I will give her the password, and she'll Floo through to you. I wish I could stay, but I do need "

"That's fine, Albus. You *are* doing this for me, after all. By the way . . . I made a discovery when I was in the loo. One I don't believe I was entirely pleased with, actually."

"What was that?" Albus asked with some concern.

"This." Minerva stood and opened her dressing gown. "They're gone, Albus. All of them. I think you rather took the expression 'kiss it and make it better' a little too literally."

"I'm sorry, my dear. I just thought, well, I believed you would prefer that . . . and they aren't ~~all~~ gone. Well, the ones from last night are. But there is a new one; didn't you notice?" He stood and approached her. "Here, right . . . here." His finger grazed her left breast, and he smiled to see her nipple growing tauter.

Minerva looked down. On the inside contour of her breast, almost on its underside, there was a deep red mark. Unlike the others, which had been various shapes and sizes, but generally somewhat round, this one was a perfect heart-shape. Her fingers joined his on her breast, and she traced its outline.

"Do you think this is an adequate replacement for the others, my dear?" Albus asked with a slight twinkle.

"Oh, you silly, sweet, foolish wizard," Minerva whispered fondly. She took his hand and guided his fingers to trace the small mark, just as she had a moment before, then she moved his fingers higher, touching the tips to her nipple before raising his hand to her mouth and gently sucking first the tip of one finger then the next. Her other hand reached into his dressing gown to caress him, and she smirked when she felt him growing heavy and firm in her hand.

"You know, I think that, if I weren't worried about becoming sore or over-taxing you it might be rather nice to . . ." Minerva trailed off as she suckled his index finger while playing with him with her other hand.

"Mmmm . . . over-tax me? I do believe you insult me, witch!" Albus said hoarsely, his eyes half-open as he watched Minerva. "And there are charms, you know, to prevent any soreness for either of us."

"Do you know any such charms?" Minerva asked coyly, whispering her words over the damp finger she held in front of her lips. She kissed the tip of his finger, then said, grasping him more firmly and drawing her hand up over him and back down again, "A big wizard like you, with such an impressive . . . wand, must know lots of . . . charms." Her thumb caressed the head of his penis. "I wouldn't want you to become sore or . . . over-taxed, either." She suckled his finger again as she stimulated his erection, stroking it the way she knew he liked.

"You really are a minx, you know," Albus whispered. "A rather naughty, teasing little minx."

"Am I really?" Minerva brought his hand back down to her breast, making his fingers trace the small heart again. "I would say you're rather naughty, yourself, marking a poor, defenceless witch like this."

"Defenceless? I rather doubt that . . . but I do think I need to show you that I do, indeed, know a few charms." He leaned forward and kissed her neck, nipping it lightly before withdrawing, causing Minerva to gasp in surprise. "Even though you *are* quite naughty."

"Do you need your wand, wizard?" Minerva asked, squeezing him once more.

"You have the wand I need in your hand, you sweet little tart," he said, "and you know it."

"Ooooh. And do you need it back?" She scraped him very lightly with her nails, causing him to gasp in surprise this time.

"Mmm." Albus stepped toward her, grasping her hand and holding it around his cock. "I could use your assistance, if you are a willing witch. Are you . . . a willing witch?" he asked, pausing to suck her lower lip for a moment.

"Can't you tell? I thought you were a great wizard."

"Of course, I can tell." He squeezed her hand around his cock and stepped forward again, backing Minerva against the table. Albus grinned and said, "Up you go!" And Minerva felt herself lifted, and she was now perched right on the edge of the table, where their breakfast dishes still sat.

Albus stepped closer again, forcing her legs to part to make room for him to stand in front of her.

"Now, you little vixen, we will see whether you are a willing witch! And whether I should cast my charms for you, despite your being such a naughty tease." He squeezed her hand around him again, then guided the tip of his penis to her entrance. "Ah, yes, very naughty and very willing! Why are you so wet here?"

"Because I'm a wicked witch who wants . . ." She gasped as he, still holding her hand around him, thrust the head of his cock against her clitoris.

"Who wants what?" asked Albus in her ear, his breath hot and hoarse against her. "What does this wicked, wanton minx want?" Again, he used Minerva's hand to stimulate his cock and press it up against her folds.

Whispering, Minerva said, "I want you to . . . take me."

"Take you? You want me to *take* you? Is that how naughty witches talk?"

"I want," she breathed the words into his ear, "I want . . . I am a very naughty witch who wants . . . to be fucked." When she uttered that final word, which did sound very naughty coming from her mouth, even after years together, Albus moaned.

"Oh, you *are* naughty, aren't you? I thought perhaps you might not be, but you are very, very naughty. I like a naughty witch." His hand closed around hers again, and he said. "You like having my wand in your hand, don't you, you vixen? You like to tease me and taunt me . . ." He rubbed the head of his penis against her again. "It is a good thing that you aren't just a tease, though . . ." He nibbled her collar bone as he used her hand to rub his cock against her clitoris.

Scarcely able to breath, Minerva asked, "How do you know I'm not just a tease? I do like to taunt you." She had been gripping his shoulder, but now she opened his dressing gown and groped downward, trying to reach his sensitive sac.

Albus moved forward and trapped her hand between them. "Oh, you are wicked, and you are a tease, you naughty, naughty witch. But you are more naughty than you are a tease, because " He paused to suckle her earlobe before licking her ear. "Because you want a *fuck*," he whispered, his words mere breath. He demonstrated her desire using his tongue on her ear as he moved the head of his penis against her nub, and Minerva gasped and moaned, these words and actions seeming more lustful than any previous ones.

"You are *very* naughty," Albus added, "but I will use my wand to cast a few charms before I give you what you want."

Minerva gasped again as she felt his magic flow through him into her, seeming to come from both his hand and his penis; it was cooling and stimulating simultaneously, and she found herself wriggling against him.

"Tell me you're a wanton witch, and I will give you what you need."

"No, no . . . you need it. You want it, too," Minerva protested weakly, knowing she would give in.

"I want to hear you say it." He squeezed her hand around him again and pressed against her folds, rubbing her clit.

"Can you take me? Can you satisfy me? Can you give me what I need?" she asked, gasping into his ear.

"Don't you want to find out? Tell me! You can feel my big . . . wand." He moved his erection against her again, and she moaned. "You know you want it. Tell me you're a wanton witch, you naughty little vixen, and I will satisfy you."

Minerva, whose eyes had been closed as she concentrated on his words and his touch, opened her eyes and looked at him, trying to repress the grin she felt coming on. It had been a long time—years, in fact—since he had played "naughty witch" or "wicked wizard" with her; it had always seemed more exciting, being so incongruous with their ordinary lives, even their usual sex life, full of variety though it had always been.

Albus looked into Minerva's eyes, and they both grinned at the same time. He kissed her hard, passionately, and Minerva freed her trapped hand to put it around him and pull him to her, squeezing him again with her other one, pulling him toward her entrance.

Albus pulled out of the kiss and said, "Ah ah ah! None of that until you admit you are a wanton witch. And because you have been so very naughty, you must also say that I am the only wizard to satisfy you!"

"Oh, please . . ." Minerva moaned, only half in play.

"Please? what?"

"Oh, please, I . . . I am," Minerva said with mock reluctance, "I am a wanton witch."

"And?" Albus titillated her clit with his crown again.

"I am a wanton witch, and you are the only wizard who can satisfy me," Minerva answered with a moan, wiggling against him.

"Mmm. Very good to hear you admit that, my naughty little minx. You teasing witch."

Albus pulled her into a kiss and removed her hand from his cock, then squeezed his penis between them, pressing himself against her bare stomach as he pulled her dressing gown from her shoulders. Suddenly, he startled her by lowering his head and closing his mouth around her right nipple, suckling it for a moment before pressing his erection between them again and holding her still, breathing heavily into her ear as he rocked against her.

"You are a teasing little minx. Feel what you do to me, you naughty witch!"

"Oh, but you said . . ." Minerva protested.

"Oh, I know what I said, but you have been *very* naughty." He put his left hand under her buttocks, his right arm around her back, and with the help of a little magic, he lifted her from the table and carried her to the sofa. "You have been very naughty. And now that you have the generous benefit of my charms, I need to show you how very well this wizard can satisfy you with his . . . wand."

Albus set her on the arm of the sofa and kissed her, pulling her against him and allowing her to wiggle against his torso.

"Mmm, such a naughty witch, rubbing herself against my beard like that."

"It feels so good," she answered, sliding against him. "Mmmm, so . . . good."

"You really are wanton," Albus said, pulling her hard against him before stepping back. "Masturbating against my beard. What a very wicked thing to do! Did it satisfy you, my little minx? Was that enough for you?"

"No, no, it wasn't enough . . . please, it wasn't enough."

"You probably want me to touch you there now, don't you? But I think you have teased me long enough! And I am going to show you how well I can satisfy you."

Minerva expected him to pull her toward him again and finally enter her, so she was surprised when he stepped back and looked at her, trying, without very much success, to leer. Minerva was stimulated enough that she was able to keep from smiling at his attempt. She circled a nipple with her finger, licked her lower lip, and arched her back, letting her thighs open to him, showing off, and was pleased to see his eyes grow darker as he watched her.

"Now, where does this very naughty witch need satisfying?" he asked, looking her up and down.

Minerva spread her legs further. "Here."

"Where?"

"Here," Minerva said, putting her hand on her thatch of hair.

"Really?" Albus raised an eyebrow. "Exactly there?"

Watching him, Minerva slid her hand lower. "Here. And here." She touched her clit then slid a finger to the entry to her vagina, slowly circling it before drawing her finger back up to her nub.

"Anywhere else?" Albus asked, swallowing as he stared at Minerva's hand.

"Well, here, too, of course," Minerva said breathily, sliding her hand down again and inserting one finger into her opening. She watched his face as she drew her finger slowly out of her vagina and up over her clitoris.

"I think," he swallowed again, then continued, "I think you need to show me once more."

"The great wizard with the huge wand needs to be shown this again?" Minerva asked, fingering her clit, then inserting two fingers and pulling them out with a wet sound. "I wouldn't think such a great wizard would need to be shown this again," she said, repeating her actions once more with three fingers before drawing them back up over her nub, then through her dark curls, drying them off.

"You are the naughtiest witch! And teasing me so," Albus said huskily. "You do like to watch me watch you, don't you, you vixen!"

Before Minerva knew what he was doing, or how he had managed it, she found herself lying stomach down, bent over the arm of the sofa, her head and chest resting on some pillows, his legs pressed against hers as his left hand trailed down the length of her spine.

"You can't watch this, my wicked little witch, but it will satisfy you. I will see to it," he said. "Yes, it will satisfy you more than your own fingers, you teasing minx!"

Minerva felt his fingers go lower, and he used his legs to push hers apart. His fingers just skimmed her until they reached her clit, where he began to rub, one finger on her nub, two others beside it, pressing, stroking, sliding.

"You wanted it here, didn't you, witch. Didn't you!" he said gruffly, demanding an answer.

"Ah, yes, there," Minerva answered with a moan.

"And here," he said, a finger circling her entrance, teasing it.

"Ye yes," Minerva gasped.

"And here, you put your finger here, didn't you, you naughty tease?" Albus demanded, inserting his forefinger into her vagina as deeply as he could go.

In her position, Minerva could barely wiggle. "Yes, yes, there, too."

"Yes, and you didn't stop with one finger, did you, when you teased me, showing me your hot, wet sex, did you?"

"No, no, I didn't . . ." Minerva groaned as she felt him pull his finger out.

"You teased me, minx, fingering yourself like that, so very, very naughty," he said as he entered her with two fingers, Minerva groaning in response. "But you didn't stop your teasing there, you wanton thing, you taunted me with three."

Minerva gasped, "Yes, three . . ." She felt him withdraw and reenter, adding a third finger to his explorations, and she moaned, "Oh, gods, ohh!"

"But it wasn't my fingers you wanted was it?" Albus asked as he twisted his hand, turning his fingers within her. "I know what naughty witches want."

She felt the head of his cock against her clit again, and he rocked against her, his fingers still in her vagina, his erection sliding back and forth over her nub, his body pressing against his hand, moving it rhythmically within her. Minerva tried unsuccessfully to rock with him.

"Do you like that?" When she only breathed harder, he increased his pressure against her nub. "I asked, do you like that?"

Minerva moaned, "Yes, yes, I am a wanton witch and I like that." And she did. As his cock rode against her, she could feel her pulse throbbing in her clit and she could hear how wet she was against him.

"You like me to do this to you, don't you? Don't you?" Albus asked in a low, hoarse voice.

"Gods, yes, yes, I like it! I like it! Yes . . . yes . . ."

Minerva moaned almost uncontrollably as his fingers stimulated her within and his erection stroked hard against her nub. And then, almost unexpectedly, an orgasm overtook her; she cried out into the pillow, her legs shuddering, and as she came, she felt his fingers move from her vagina to her clit, and his penis entered her, thrusting hard.

"And here, witch? You want it here?" he asked, showing no mercy for her state.

"Yes, yes, there, there . . ." she responded, her answer barely more than a gasp as her orgasm was extended by his thrusting.

"Tell me again what it is you want, you naughty witch," he said, pumping twice more before stopping and fingering her clit, his cock buried deep in her vagina. "Tell me."

"I want you to . . . to satisfy me."

"And how do you want me to satisfy you?"

"I . . . I want you to take . . . ah . . ." He moved within her as his hand pressed against her, and then he stopped again, waiting for her response.

"I want you to take me," Minerva said, breathing hard as her orgasm subsided.

"And how do you want me to take you, vixen?"

"I want you to fuck me," she whispered in response.

Albus drew back and pressed in again. "I didn't hear that. What do you want?"

"I want you to . . . I want you to fuck me. I need a good fucking," Minerva said more loudly.

"Oh, you naughty witch! You think I can do that? That I can . . ." He pulled all of the way out of her, leaving her to groan at his absence, before pushing back into her heat. "That I can *fuck* you? That I can give you a good fucking? What makes you think I can give you a good fucking?" He asked hoarsely, standing still, waiting.

"Because . . . because you are so big . . . such a great wizard, and so big . . ."

"Big?" he asked, pulling out and teasing her entrance with the head of his cock. "What does that mean? What will satisfy you?"

"You have a . . . a big cock and oh, gods," she moaned as he rocked in and out once more. "You have a big cock and I can feel you in me now . . . oh, gods, yes, you can fuck me. You can give me a good fucking!"

"Oh, you naughty tease! You are very wanton witch, using such dirty words, teasing me, just so I'll satisfy you. You do want it, don't you? *Mycock* in you . . . *fucking* you . . . I know what a teasing, naughty little vixen needs! But you have to say it . . . say it again!"

"Fuck me! Fuck me, yes! Oh oh oh," Minerva moaned with desire.

Albus began to rock in and out of her, at first slowly, then faster, at one point pausing and whispering a slight spell before resuming, pounding in and out, his fingers still at her engorged nub, but only pressing against it without over-stimulating it. Minerva moaned and gripped the pillows beneath her. And each time his cock pushed into her, he hit her sweet spot forcefully, and she was soon coming again, this time with a flow of liquid into his hand, and her moans grew louder as he continued to thrust into her as she came, causing him to repeat his little spell, ensuring he would not spend himself until he was ready.

As she lay gasping, Albus finally stilled his movement. He wiped his hand against the couch, then rubbed her back. His hand was still damp, but she scarcely noticed, her own perspiration coating her.

"And now, for the remainder of the demonstration that I can, indeed, satisfy you," Albus said, withdrawing from her.

"More?" Minerva said somewhat weakly, her arms lying limply around her head.

"Oh, yes, more. You wanted a good fucking, witch! After all the magic I've expended, and all the other energy, as well, you didn't think I would stop there, did you? Did you think that was a good fucking? Two orgasms? That is hardly satisfying to a naughty, wanton witch! One with such a very needy, hot, wet sex," he said, inserting his finger into her and pulling it out again, "and such a dirty mouth."

He helped her roll over on her back, and Minerva saw he had shed his dressing gown. "Besides, as you can see, I haven't been satisfied yet. You need to satisfy me, you tease."

Minerva had heard the spells he had uttered to help him control his orgasm, but she played along with him. "I am sorry I am not satisfying to you . . . it is very naughty of me to tease you. You are right, I am a tease."

Despite the charms Albus had cast to make sure that she didn't get sore, Minerva thought a bit of a change might be in order. She sat up, then slid off the couch and directly to her knees. First she licked him, finding the taste of herself on him peculiar, but familiar and not unpleasant. She didn't put her mouth around him at first, though, only using her tongue before moving down and licking and gently suckling his balls, then humming against them. They were sensitive, and she felt him grip her shoulder harder in response. Then she put just the head of his penis in her mouth, swirling it with her tongue, causing him to moan, before standing again.

"I am very sorry for not satisfying you . . ." Minerva said, looking down in false contrition.

"I don't think you are sorry. You are a teasing, wanton minx. You aren't sorry at all. You enjoy this, don't you? Showing yourself off to me? Teasing me? And taunting me?" He pulled her against him and pressed his erection against her stomach.

"Only because I am very wicked and I'm not completely satisfied yet, just as you said."

"Not satisfied? What would satisfy such a hot, wet, naughty, teasing . . . witch?" he asked in a low whisper as he reached between them and rubbed her folds.

Albus lifted her as he had earlier, and she put her legs around him, rocking against him as she'd done before. Somewhat to her surprise, he carried her to the window near the fireplace. A whispered spell opened the window, its leaded glass panes swinging inward. Despite the fact that she knew that no one could even detect the presence of the windows, let alone see in, Minerva felt exposed as he held her there, naked, before the open window.

"Do you think they all know what a wickedly wanton witch you are?" Albus asked, indicating the few people on the lawn. The only ones she could recognize from that distance were Flitwick and Sprout. "What a naughty little show off? Showing me your needy, hot, wet . . . pussy?"

"No, no . . . they don't know," Minerva answered, looking down at the witches and wizards far below them.

"Because you are only wicked with me . . . I am the only wizard who can satisfy you and your wanton desires."

"Yes . . . yes . . . that's why. You are the only wizard who can satisfy me. I need you to satisfy my wicked, wicked desires." She rubbed herself against him, his erection tantalizingly close to her entrance, then leaned forward and licked his shoulder then nipped it lightly.

"Trust me," Albus whispered, needlessly, into her ear as he set her on the window ledge.

"Hold on," he said more loudly. "No, not to me, witch, to the window above your head. Yes, like that. Now my cock needs you to pleasure it you've been teasing it long enough."

Albus waved his hand, and Minerva could feel an invisible cushion behind her, holding her in place. She smiled, feeling quite secure now, and she uttered a spell of her own, creating a handle at the top of the window, the better to hold on to. She felt the head of his cock at the entrance of her vagina, and she lifted herself up and settled herself onto it, gasping in pleasure as she slid over him. Albus moved only a little closer, his knees now touching the wall beneath the window, but otherwise, he didn't move.

"Pleasure me, witch, pleasure me while I watch you," he demanded.

Minerva, using the back of her thighs against the ledge and her arms over her head as she hung from the window, raised herself up and lowered herself again, then did the same once more, moaning as she impaled herself on him. Albus was gripping the edge of the window with his left hand and had his right elbow pressed up against the window frame; he was breathing heavily as she rode him, rising up and down on his erection, pulling herself almost all the way off him before lowering herself again. Minerva leaned back experimentally and found that the invisible cushion still held her. With a smile, she let go of the handle she had created, and she leaned further back.

"Am I pleasuring you, wizard?" she asked. "Or am I simply pleasuring myself, like a naughty witch?" She rotated her hips, pressing her clitoris against him as she did so.

"Are you a naughty witch, pleasuring yourself on me? Let me watch you pleasure yourself on me, then, and if I see you come, maybe I will take some pleasure myself and give you a good, hard fucking." Once again, his unexpected use of the term caused Minerva to become more excited, which she hadn't thought possible.

She wriggled, writhed, rolled, and rocked against him, rubbing her clit into his pelvis and moaning, until finally, breathing raggedly, she began to simply rock up and down, laying entirely back against her invisible cushion, hanging out the window, Albus leaning forward slightly.

"You are going to come again, aren't you, you naughty thing? Yes, I can see it in your face. You are going to come, with all those people below, not knowing what a wicked, wanton witch you are, satisfying yourself on me. Yes, you are coming again," he said in a whisper.

"Tell me what I'm doing to you . . . I need to hear it. I am a very naughty witch who needs to hear it," she said, moaning.

"You're fucking me, witch, you're fucking my cock," he answered in a rough whisper. Almost immediately, he felt her clench around him as her orgasm claimed her and she moaned more loudly.

Her orgasm was milder this time, but Minerva felt drained and lay back against her cushion of air, still feeling oddly exposed, and hearing voices outside in the distance.

"You have no shame, do you, witch? Riding me like that here, naked in the window . . ."

"I'm a shameless, wanton witch, who loves to pleasure herself on your cock," Minerva answered breathlessly, very glad at that moment for the charms that Albus had cast to keep any soreness at bay. She wondered if they would extend to her legs and her arms, too . . .

"I think I'm going to have to teach you a lesson, witch, about what happens when you pleasure yourself on me, riding me so wantonly."

Albus lifted her again, carrying her, limp in his arms, back to the table where they had begun. With an impish grin, Albus waved his hand and all of the dishes and cutlery went crashing to the floor, making quite an alarming noise, although Minerva could tell that nothing had broken. Forestalling any complaint that might ruin the atmosphere, Albus kissed Minerva full on the mouth as he settled her on the table, drawing her tongue into his mouth. Minerva almost uttered a different sort of complaint, about them being too old for this, when not only did she realise that that would sound rather ridiculous after what they had just done, but that this would likely be easier on Albus, as well, since he would not need to be as careful of his right hand.

Albus kissed her once more before easing her down to lie back on the empty table. He used his left hand to raise her right leg so that her ankle rested on his shoulder. Minerva lifted her other leg to rest on his right shoulder. He had never withdrawn from her, and as soon as her legs were raised, he began to thrust vigorously, watching her

face as he did so, and rolling a nipple between his fingers.

"Tell me what you like," Albus gasped. "Tell me, my shameless, wanton little witch!"

"I like . . ." Minerva gasped, unable to continue.

"Tell me . . ." He pumped into her, looking at her face as his penis moved in and out of her, her head tilted so she could watch him.

"I like to feel you in me."

Albus stopped a moment. "In you, like this?" He stood, staring down at her, tracing shapes on her breasts. "Just . . . in you? Is that truly all that a shameless vixen wants? Is that all you like? After pleasuring yourself on me, in front of the world like that, so shamelessly, I would think you would like something more than to feel me in you."

Minerva moaned and rocked against him. "I like you to move in me."

"Tell me what that is, when I move in you, in your needy, wet, heat. Tell me what you like, witch!" Albus was almost trembling with his need to thrust, but he held himself still and pressed his hand down on Minerva's pelvis, stopping her from rotating against him.

"I like it when you move your . . . your cock " Minerva swallowed. "When you move your cock in and out of me . . . like you did." She knew what he wanted her to say, but if he was going to tease, she was going to tease him back, and she gripped the muscles of her vagina around his penis, rhythmically, taking pleasure in his reaction.

"Oh, you are wicked. Very wicked." He moved his hand down and squeezed her clitoris, then flicked his thumb across her nub. "Tell me, witch, what am I doing?" He withdrew and plunged into her again, then repeated it once more, stimulating her clit with his thumb. "Is that what you like?"

"Yes . . . yes, that is what I like." Her eyes were focussed on the point where their bodies joined.

"Tell me what you like, witch! Tell me," Albus said, pumping once more, then stopping half way. "Use those dirty words that I know you like so well. It excites you, I know it does."

"Or what will you do?" Minerva asked with a lick of her lips.

"I will make you watch while I satisfy myself without you. A wanton witch such as yourself would find that torture!" He withdrew from her and moved his hand from her clit to his cock and began to stroke his erection, as if to make good on his threat.

"No, no, not that, please! I like it when you fuck me with your cock," she cried out in feigned distress. "Please, I want you to fuck me! Fuck me, please!"

And with the words barely out of her mouth, he had reentered her, plunging deep and hard, thrusting in and out, mindful of his angle and stimulating her thoroughly.

"Say it again, say it again, and I will sate us both, witch! You wicked, shameless little vixen!" he rasped, eyes fixed on her face.

"Fuck me . . ." Minerva gasped the words.

"Again, from your dirty little mouth," Albus breathed as he pumped into her. "Again!"

"Fuck me, fuck me," she shouted in rhythm with his thrusts. "Fuck me, fuck fuck fuck, oh, gods! Yes!" As unlikely as Minerva had thought it a few minutes ago when she lay, exhausted, in the window, as Albus drove into her, fondling her clitoris again, she began to feel another climax grow in her, and her moans and gasps grew.

"Oh, gods, yes, yes . . . oh, hard hard yes hard . . ." she cried, her voice hoarsened after her previous exertions. Her head was thrown back, and her breath came in gasps as her eyes closed and she shuddered as her orgasm exploded and coursed through her body. "Harder! Hard hard hard!"

And Albus obliged her desire by pounding harder and faster, until finally, with a groan and a gasp, he pressed into her one more time and came as her orgasm faded around him. Exhausted, he collapsed onto her, head on her chest, barely able to remain on his feet.

"Oh, gods, Minerva . . . oh . . . Minerva, my sweet delight," he murmured. He turned his head just enough to kiss her damp skin softly, before resting again, his breathing only slowly returning to normal.

"Let's go lie down somewhere more comfortable," Minerva suggested after few moments.

"Mmm." Albus pushed himself up with one hand and felt himself slip out of her. "I see now why we don't use the soreness charms often . . . we tire faster than we get sore." He grinned down at her.

"Speak for yourself, Albus! Well, I suppose you're right . . ." Returning to reality, she sat up and looked around, trying to spy her dressing gown. "It was fun, though, wasn't it?"

"Immensely, my dear!" He Summoned her robe for her and draped it around her shoulders before Summoning his own from where it lay by the sofa.

They made their way over to the sofa and collapsed together. Albus put his arm around Minerva and pulled her to him, kissing the top of her head as she settled against his chest. Albus was almost asleep when Minerva said, "I hate to say this, but I'm hungry again. And I'm afraid that what was left of our breakfast . . . well, you made rather a mess." Despite nothing breaking, there was spilled tea and food strewn all over the floor next to the table.

"I did, didn't I?" he answered drowsily. He opened one eye. "How decent are you? Decent enough," he said, answering his own question. "Wilspy!"

Minerva pulled her gown a little more closely around her. The little house-elf had seen her in various states of undress, and Albus, too, of course, but somehow, when she was *with* Albus in a state of undress, she found it very embarrassing to have the loyal little elf pop in on them. And she didn't think that Wilspy was entirely comfortable, either, though she couldn't be sure of that.

After a few heartbeats, Wilspy arrived with a sharp crack.

"My Professors is needing me?" the house-elf asked, a broad smile on her face.

"Yes, my dear," Albus said, in his most apologetic tone. "I am afraid I made rather a mess earlier. I was hoping that you could clean it up but after you have brought Minerva a little snack."

"Something for Albus, too, please, Wilspy."

"I am back in a jiffy!" she responded, Disapparating immediately to fetch their snack.

In a "jiffy," the house-elf returned with toast, lemon curd, and tea.

"Is this enough, Professors?" she asked before popping over to clear away the remains of their breakfast.

"That's fine, thank you, Wilspy," Minerva answered, thinking that lunch was around the corner, anyway.

Minerva ate a few slices of toast with lemon curd and drank two cups of tea, but was only able to cajole Albus into eating one slice of toast and sipping at a cup of tea before he fell asleep. Minerva found her wand in the pocket of her dressing gown and cast a *Tempus* alarm for eleven-fifteen. Albus would need a shower before dressing and leaving for lunch. Then she settled against him and fell asleep, listening to his heartbeat and feeling the steady thrum of his magic pulsing against her.

Shortly before eleven, Minerva woke. She and Albus had slowly tilted as they slept, and he was now partially lying down, she still resting against him. She took a deep, satisfied breath, and let it out slowly. But, much as she enjoyed lying against him, she was getting stiff, and she imagined Albus was, as well. She slowly disengaged from his embrace, trying not to waken him. As she sat up, he rolled over on his back and threw his left arm over his head, but didn't seem to wake. Minerva stood and then moved his legs so they were fully on the couch. Albus murmured something, but without opening his eyes, so Minerva just leaned over and kissed his forehead and whispered, "I'm going to take a shower, now, love. Sleep a while longer."

She received no response, but he seemed to sigh and fall more deeply asleep. Despite not feeling as though she needed another shower earlier that morning, after their recent activities, Minerva felt sweaty and definitely in need of a wash. She left Albus sleeping, confident that the *Tempus* alarm she had set, which he could dismiss as well as she, would wake him in time to get ready for lunch.

Minerva took a quick shower and, feeling refreshed, she was standing naked in the bathroom drying her hair when Albus walked in.

"You abandoned me!" he said, feigning a pout.

"Not at all! I freed you to sleep a little more comfortably until you had to get up, dearest." He nuzzled the back of her neck as she waved her wand and charmed her hair into a French twist. "And this way, I could be through in the bathroom before you had to use the shower, and I would be ready when Poppy arrived."

"Mmm, well, if you put it that way," he said, nibbling her ear from behind. "Although we could have showered together."

"Oh, my, Albus, after this morning, the thought of taking a shower with you and I know we would start out just washing, but I doubt very much we would stop there it is just exhausting! I wouldn't mind, myself, getting exhausted with you, but you do need to make it to the Great Hall for lunch and then have your conversation with Lupin. I wouldn't want you falling asleep in your soup without me there to catch you!" she teased.

"All right, my dear." He ran a gentle hand from her breast to her hip and looked up to smile at her in the mirror. Seeing her there, he cocked his head. "Hmm, it does appear that I have developed a rather bad habit," he said, turning her to face him.

There was a very clear love bite on the side of her neck, another one just beside her collarbone, and yet another just above her left breast. He touched each one, smiling. "They don't hurt?" he asked, making sure.

"Not at all you didn't do it too hard, so they don't hurt."

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Minerva interrupted, "And no, I do not want you to do anything about them. I could do it myself, if I wished, though if I do want to hide them or get rid of them, I will ask you to do it. But for the weekend, I see no reason to do that."

"Poppy "

"I am not planning on removing my robes while Poppy is here. If, by some peculiar chance, I have to for some unforeseen medical reason, I doubt very much that whether I have a few love marks or not would be of any consequence."

"But this one, at least, may show," Albus said, indicating the one on her neck.

Minerva merely shrugged. "I'm sure she's seen similar marks before, Albus."

"That's just it . . . what I mean is, she'll know . . . she'll see what I've done."

To Minerva's amusement, Albus Dumbledore was blushing like a schoolboy. She kept herself from laughing by kissing him, instead. "Oh, Albus! I doubt very much she thinks we have been in a chaste relationship these last oh-so-many years!"

"Well, no, of course not, but . . . it's embarrassing," he said.

Albus still hated it when, every year, Poppy Pomfrey checked the general state of his health, and always asked how his sex life was. She didn't put it precisely like that, of course, but it was the point of her question, and he still wasn't used to it, despite her having conducted the exam for over forty years. The first time he had gone to her as a regular part of her health checks on the Hogwarts staff, it was fine for the first several minutes, as she waved her wand over him in all the standard diagnostic spells. But then she asked him to lower the top half of his robes. She had turned her back and written some notes on his health record, but when she turned around again, he was still fully clothed. Poppy raised her eyebrows.

"Now, Professor . . ."

"I really don't think this is all necessary. You learn everything you need to from the diagnostic spells," he protested.

"It is a part of the standard examination, Professor. You know that. You've had one every year since you began teaching."

Albus just looked at her, tongue-tied, unable to tell her that it had been quite different when it had been large, jovial Madam Valentius, whom he hadn't even known before she had started as the Hogwarts matron, or the ancient, bent-over Madam Sanitas who had died in her post in 1940 and who had been matron when he was a boy at Hogwarts. He looked at Poppy Pomfrey and he still saw the bubbly little Hufflepuff who had bounced up and down the first time she had turned a wooden matchstick into a silver needle.

"Look, Professor, if you don't want me to do it, you can go to St. Mungo's "

"No, no . . . but I assure you, I am quite healthy. In every way," he added, remembering the questions that Madam Valentius had always asked him about his bowel movements, his urinary habits, and whether he was still able to achieve an erection to his satisfaction.

Poppy had narrowed her eyes at him a moment, then, startling him, she'd whirled around and left the small examination room, shutting the door behind her. He thought he had offended her professionalism, but before he could become very worried, she returned a few minutes later and thrust something at him.

"Mr Dumbledore! You are out of uniform! Put this *onimmediately!*" she said sharply, then she turned and left him alone again.

He had unfolded the bundle and discovered a Hogwarts uniform of the type he had worn when he was a student, though a size or two larger than the last such uniform he'd worn. He raised his eyebrows, but he undressed and redressed in the old-fashioned uniform. It even had the small version of the Gryffindor crest on it that had been on the robes when he had been a student. The hat that came with it was the first-years' round, brimless cap, which hadn't been worn by any students since at least the 80s. He cringed, but pulled it onto his greying head. Just in time, because Poppy was back.

"That's better, Mr Dumbledore. Now, you may address me as either 'Matron' or as 'Madam Pomfrey,' as you prefer, but *lwill* have your cooperation!"

"Yes, ma'am, Matron." Poppy had put on a more old-fashioned version of the mediwitch hat she wore daily, or had Transfigured her own to resemble it, and it now tied under chin and included a wimple. With her newly sharp manner, he began to feel like an errant student instead of a teacher who was being examined by one of his own

pupils.

Poppy began the examination all over again, giving barked instructions to him, and by the time she told him to lower the top half of his robes, he complied obediently, still somewhat embarrassed, but not prepared to defy her, either. She completed her examination by asking him to pull his robes back up then open them below. Albus complied again, unbuttoning the lower half of his robes reluctantly. She barely looked, however, merely ping-ponging one final diagnostic charm from his genitals before asking him the requisite questions about bowel movements and urinary function, then telling him he could button up again.

After closing up his robes, relieved that her examination had been so cursory, Albus said, "Um, wasn't there something else, another question . . ."

"Those are all the questions that I would ask of a male first-year student, Mr. Dumbledore. I trust that if you have any more specific troubles, you are intelligent enough to visit a Healer who specialises in such things," she said, giving him another sharp look.

Poppy had left him alone to dress in his own robes, feeling somewhat sheepish about the fuss he had made. She had never done precisely the same thing again—that was the only time she gave him a student uniform to wear—but whenever he came for his annual exam, she addressed him as Mr. Dumbledore, only performed the more limited exam, although after several years, she did begin asking him the more routine questions about his sexual health, and, when he reached one hundred-twenty, she had handed him the card of a Healer at St. Mungo's, and asked that Albus see him for a thorough examination of the type that all wizards past a certain age require.

Minerva looked at Albus, a smile on her face. "Is this the same wizard who just had me hanging naked out a window?" she asked teasingly.

"But no one could really see you."

"Is this the same wizard who has made love to me in the staff room on more than one occasion? When there might be others waiting outside to enter?"

"I always cast wards!" Albus protested.

"Or whom I have known to enjoy certain delights *à fresco*?" she asked with raised eyebrows, still teasing.

"But never anywhere we could be seen."

"Albus, Poppy isn't just an old friend who is quite aware of our relationship, she is also a professional! Really! I hardly think it matters if she sees a few marks."

Albus caressed the little marks he'd left. "But these are ours . . ." he said softly, trying to remind her of how he felt about them. It wasn't simply embarrassment or a desire for privacy, though it was that . . .

"Albus," Minerva said, "if you like, I will make sure they are covered up, but you may remember that just a few days ago, Severus literally watched you pleasuring me, and your response to it was to say he should have gone off for a wank, if I remember your words correctly. Surely that was far more private and personal than this."

"Well, of course it was," Albus answered, startled by the turn the conversation had taken, and not liking the memories it evoked. "But it happened, and there was nothing we could do about it afterward. And I didn't say he *should* have gone off for a wank, just that it would have been a healthier reaction—he's a man!"

Minerva grew stiff. "Albus Dumbledore, I do not wish to speak of Severus, nor of the relative degree of . . . exposure there is between having someone see me with my legs spread as you pleasure me and having someone notice a small red mark on my throat." Minerva noticed that Albus's blush was growing, but she didn't stop there. "*However*," she said distinctly, "however, if you mean to suggest that it is preferable simply because he was a wizard and Poppy is a witch, I beg you to reconsider that statement."

"No, of course not. You know I wasn't happy about that, either. I wouldn't want *anyone* to ever witness what Severus did. But the fact was, he did. And . . . you are right, of course, it doesn't matter whether it is a witch or a wizard. That wasn't what I was saying at all. They're two entirely different things." Albus looked deflated and embarrassed. "And I suppose it doesn't matter if a friend sees the mark, if you don't mind it, yourself . . . just . . . suit yourself, Minerva." He shrugged and tried to move away toward the shower.

Minerva put her arms around him and held him, realising suddenly how she'd driven him into a corner, and unsure exactly how she'd come to do that, herself. "I'm sorry, of course I know you don't mind it in the way I made it seem. But I'm really not ready to be rid of them, and it bothered me so little that Poppy might see them, I didn't even think about it until you mentioned it." She leaned back, arms still around him, and looked up. "I'll use a Glamour, as usual, all right?"

"You don't need to do for me . . . however you are most comfortable, really, my dear," he said, trying not to sound as sad as he felt. Why had she tried to compare the business with Severus with this? The situations were so different, they were beyond comparing. She had made it sound as though he hadn't cared that someone witnessed him pleasuring her, and of course he had! For all of his play, he was no exhibitionist, and he certainly wouldn't want to put Minerva on display. And it really wasn't so terribly important that she cover the mark with a Glamour, if only Poppy was going to be there to see it; it was just a little embarrassing for him, that was all. If Minerva hadn't pressed the issue, he would have just shrugged it off, taken his shower, and hoped that Poppy didn't reflect too long on his sexual activities with Minerva.

Minerva kissed him lightly on the lips.

"This *would* be most comfortable to me, you know that. I already have a lot to talk to her about, I don't need her staring jealously at my love-bites, wishing she had some of her own!" Minerva joked. "*Really*, Albus. And you will be late if you don't hurry now." She kissed him again.

Albus returned her kiss before shedding his dressing gown to take his shower.

"I love you, you know," he said quietly, feeling better, but still somewhat unsettled. It wasn't whether she used a Glamour or not that unsettled him; she'd had to bring up the other incident, just when he had been so happy to have his beloved Minerva back with him again, and not having to share her with anyone anymore.

"And I love you, my darling Albus," Minerva answered.

He turned to enter the shower, when he heard Minerva first gasp then giggle. He turned back, eyebrows raised, still slightly hurt that she would seem to so deliberately misunderstand his meaning, and feeling that she had put him in the awkward position of defending words he never had wanted to utter, anyway, but he was nonetheless curious about what she was laughing at.

"Albus," Minerva said, chuckling, "are you having any discomfort when you sit down?"

Now he was puzzled. "No . . . well, perhaps slightly," he said, reflecting on it. He had absent-mindedly thought he must have done something to himself during the activities of the last day, but hadn't given it much consideration.

"I think you need to look in the mirror."

Albus turned his back to the full-length mirror next to the door and looked over his shoulder. Right in the centre of his left buttock were purple finger marks.

"Oh, my," he said. His lips twitched, then he laughed, Minerva joining him.

"I think I may have become a little enthusiastic at some point," Minerva said. "I'm sorry I bruised you."

"Last night, I think. That last time, remember?"

She grinned. "I don't think I could forget! Still, I didn't mean to grip you so hard."

He shrugged, smiling. "I don't really notice it, unless I shift my weight when I am sitting down. It's fine."

"Well, at least we don't have to consider a Glamour for it," Minerva said. "Unless you plan on mooning everyone at lunch?" She giggled giddily at that thought, and Albus laughed, too, imagining her suggestion.

"No," he said, catching his breath. "I had not intended to. After all, no one from the Ministry will be in attendance; there would be no point!"

They both laughed even harder at that, then Minerva picked up her wand and indicated he should turn around.

"I said it's fine, Minerva," Albus said, backing toward the shower.

"What, you don't trust me?" she asked, eyebrow quirked, a smile on her face.

He turned around for her and she incanted, *'Solatus!'* There, that should feel a bit better now. But don't worry, it's as purple as it was before! And Albus, ~~am~~ sorry about what I said before. I know you didn't mean what I implied you did. Well, what I said you meant," Minerva said, feeling bad about having created a problem where there really was none.

Early on in their relationship decades before, both of them, as private people, took for granted that Minerva would cover any marks that showed and not simply out of her own sense of modesty and preference not to be embarrassed, but also because very few people knew of their relationship, and it was best not to have anyone speculating on the origin of any love bites she might have. That was something shared between them, something that reminded them of the special time they spent together and the passion they shared. Not that Albus marked her often, or as heavily as he had the previous night he associated one person marking another with Dark Wizards such as Grindelwald and Voldemort, despite recognising the essential differences between their marks and his but it did happen occasionally and spontaneously. And she routinely covered them if she was going to be in public.

Minerva continued, "I started out just . . . just teasing you a little, but then I thought of Severus, and of what he saw, and it put me in a bad mood. I know . . . I know what you really were saying."

"And that was?" Albus asked as he started the water in the shower.

"You actually did say it, I just . . . I didn't hear it. They are ours. For us." Minerva looked at him, waiting for his reaction.

Albus turned, smiled, and nodded happily at her, glad to put Minerva's momentary fit of pique behind them. "Sure you won't join me?"

"I would love nothing better, but you have ten minutes before you are supposed to meet Poppy in your office, so if you don't want her to contemplate the two of us up here in the throes of passion, I suggest you hurry!" Minerva smiled as Albus closed the shower door behind him.

Minerva picked up Albus's dressing gown and hung it up for him on the hook on the back of the door, then she took her own dressing gown into the bedroom and began to gather together the clothes she would wear that day. Through the open door, she could hear Albus humming; it was a cheerful tune, not one of the more sombre ones he'd been singing in the shower in recent times.

She pulled out his set of midnight blue robes with contrasting silver piping, and the matching hat, thinking he might like to wear it. It wasn't very cold yet, so she didn't get him any underclothes the robes were double-layered, anyway but did pull out a pair of silvery socks and set out his short, dark blue boots for him. She was slightly concerned he might be too warm, but every time she'd expressed that concern in the past, he had simply tutted and reminded her what cooling charms were for. In their early days together, that remark would have her fixing her gaze just below his waist, occasionally even accompanied by a playful grab at him . . . after all, in those days, his cooling charms seemed most often used to alleviate certain symptoms of his physical attraction to her. She smiled remembering how he had told her of retiring to her loo to cast cooling charms on himself, practically chilling himself through in the process of reducing his unwelcome erection.

As Minerva dressed, Albus came out of the bathroom, whistling as he waved his wand around his head, drying his hair and beard and casting a detangling charm at the same time.

"Oh, lovely, my dear! Just the robes I wanted for today. Thank you!" He kissed her cheek. "I am afraid I am late," he said with a sigh. "But I'm sure Poppy will wait."

Albus dressed quickly, then pulled on his socks and short boots, using his wand for most of it, given that his right hand was no longer available for such tasks. Minerva hated to see that there had been so many things he had preferred to do manually, despite having plenty of magic to spare and more than sufficient talent. So she fussed with her own clothes, then cast a quick Glamour to cover the two marks that showed the one on her neck and the one beside her collarbone.

"Walk me out, my dear?" Albus asked.

"Of course!"

"I plan on being back by one-thirty, unless there is a major crisis and I am absolutely unable to. I need to see Remus, of course, and then I am going to pick up some work from my office to bring back with me. I thought perhaps we could work on it together, get it done more quickly . . ."

"An excellent idea," Minerva said agreeably. She really didn't mind working either him working or her if they were doing it together. She rather enjoyed it, in fact.

They stood in front of the fireplace, and Albus looked down and caressed her face.

"You look very handsome, Albus." The robes made his eyes look an even deeper blue, and the silver piping on his hat and down the front of the robes complemented the bright white of his hair.

"And you, as always, are beautiful." Albus bent and kissed her, not caring about the hour, just gently kissing her lips several times, then her cheek, then trailing kisses to her ear and down her throat.

Minerva gasped as she felt him suck particularly vigorously at a sensitive spot on her neck. He hummed and sucked it again, pulling it between his teeth, and Minerva felt a ripple of magic.

"Oh, oh, Albus, what . . . what are you doing?"

He kissed her once more lightly on the lips. "Just a little good-bye present, until I see you this afternoon and I expect to see it when I return," he said with a twinkle, tilting his head and looking at her neck. "Rather nice one, if I do say so myself!" He laughed at her expression. "I'll be sending Poppy right through, but if you hurry, you may be able to see it before she does!"

"Albus!?" Minerva had no idea what to think, but Albus just winked at her in the way that always put a silly grin on her face, then he tossed in some Floo-powder and was away in a flash of green.

Minerva hurried into the bedroom and looked into the mirror, waving her wand to light some lamps so that she could see better. There, in the spot just below where her jaw met her neck, right beside her pulse point, there were two marks, one red, one purple, in the shape of intertwined hearts. The silly wizard! Minerva blushed. Sometimes he was worse than a child! But no boy could have done that, and Minerva thought that it was truly very sweet of him. Rather silly, but very sweet. She was just admiring the way he had made it appear as though the two hearts were intertwined when she heard Poppy's voice calling her from the other room.

"Coming, Poppy!"

As Albus showered, humming to himself, he reflected on Minerva's unexpected reaction to his barely voiced embarrassment about having his little love bites uncovered to the eyes of a third party well, to Poppy. He was only slightly embarrassed after all, as Minerva said, Poppy was an old friend, and a professional, and she no doubt had some notion that he and Minerva still enjoyed one another, even after all these years. If Minerva didn't mind, well, it wasn't what he would prefer, liking to keep them as something special between them, yet it also wasn't the end of the world. It wasn't like Minerva, though, to be so dismissive of his feelings, nor to believe he didn't care about hers. He had only been going to offer to cast the Glamour for her and she had cut him off, teasing him; then her teasing had suddenly become something else . . . but, as Minerva said, she had remembered Severus, and that had put her in a bad mood.

They had had such a lovely morning. Albus didn't want Minerva to be in a bad mood for any reason, but particularly not on account of Severus. Minerva may have recovered from the way she had felt about what she'd done with the other wizard, but it seemed to Albus that she hadn't completely recovered from the sheer intrusiveness of Severus's presence over five long days, and she no doubt had other feelings about the situation that she perhaps hadn't even discovered yet. Albus knew that he couldn't "kiss it and make it better," but perhaps there was something he could do to help. Something, perhaps that would reassure her . . .

It seemed odd to Albus that Minerva wouldn't simply cover the little marks with a Glamour as a matter of habit, let alone that she would take offense at his mention of it, and then go on to dismiss his feelings about it so easily. After all that she had been through during the last few days, though, there were probably more factors at play than he could be aware of at that moment, yet the fact that she had raised Severus again, brought him between them . . . could there still be some insecurity about their relationship? Minerva had no reason to feel insecure, and Albus didn't believe she was. But perhaps it wasn't insecurity, so much as it was a positive desire to revel in their relationship, rather as they had together that morning in their loving, trusting, and highly . . . *stimulating* play.

Albus smiled as he remembered how their playtime had begun, her tracing the little heart-shaped mark he'd left her on her breast. His smile broadened. That was something he could do for her . . . Something a bit more artistic than his last effort, perhaps. Something that might indicate that he belonged to her as much as she to him. If Minerva wanted, it would be something playful that she could share with her friend . . . and if Minerva didn't want to share it, she *could* cover it up, if she wished.

Note: Because I am beginning work on a sequel to this, I am reworking the ending. There are now fifteen chapters and an epilogue t&n Act of Love.

I would love to hear what folk think of this chapter I know it may not be everyone's cuppa, but I hope that some enjoyed it. Thanks for reading!

Fifteen: Recovery

Chapter 15 of 16

Severus returns to work and Minerva has lunch with Poppy.



Chapter Fifteen: Recovery

Minerva never knew how it was that Poppy managed to hear everything that went on in the school when she spent almost all of her time in the Hospital Wing, but lunch went by quickly as Poppy caught Minerva up on all the doings of students and staff that she had missed over the last few days, including the fact that Poppy had devoted an entire private room in the infirmary to the cards, flowers, and sweets that had arrived for her during her "illness."

"It was just the normal trickle of cards from the students, a few bouquets from other teachers, and Gryffindor sent an extra large box of Bertie's, but then after your illness was reported on in the *Daily Prophet*, it seemed as though every witch or wizard in Britain whom you have ever taught thought they should send a get-well card. You'll have quite a time answering them all."

Minerva smiled. "That is kind of them. I am sorry about everything you had to deal with over the last few days, Poppy. Especially Melina. That put you in a terribly awkward position."

"Melina apologised before she left, but she seemed . . . strange."

"What do you mean?"

"It was more than just discovering that you weren't ill and were sequestered away. I've known Melina a long time. She learned something else that disturbed her, I could tell."

"She did, accidentally, but she received no explanation. Fortunately, she asked no questions; she knew better."

"Hmmpf. I suppose you're referring to my direct and somewhat pointed questions after you took that potion." Poppy sighed. "I do wish I knew what was going on, but I understand. It's Order business."

Minerva hesitated, then said, "It wasn't precisely Order business. In a way it was, and you did help save a life. I just . . . I couldn't tell you then. And I shouldn't tell you now."

"You know I wouldn't repeat it."

"I know, but I'm not the only one involved."

"Mmm. Severus, may I guess?"

Minerva nodded.

"I saw him at breakfast, as surly as ever. He seems fine." Poppy looked at her. "Since you didn't need the potion he is brewing today, I assume he didn't need to go to Mongolia for the ingredients, but needed to be elsewhere. Am I right?"

Minerva nodded again.

"Since someone obviously did go to Mongolia and brought back an enormous amount of magical Mongolian creeperwort, may I presume that, although Severus didn't actually go to Mongolia, someone went in his stead?"

"You always were too clever for a Hufflepuff," Minerva said.

Poppy just laughed. "Being a Hufflepuff, as you know, is not antithetical to being clever! So, what did you need with Severus or did Severus need with you?"

It was Minerva's turn to chuckle. "I would tell you . . . I want to. But it's also somewhat embarrassing. And not only for me. If I were to tell you, you could never let on to Severus that you know a thing. It would be terrible for him, and believe me, he has suffered enough from the situation already without adding additional embarrassment for him. And I really don't want any sympathy, either. Or at least, only the right kind. I don't want to hear you saying anything negative about Severus, as you did that evening in the infirmary."

Poppy raised her eyebrows. She nodded. "I've seen some of what he's gone through, and although I don't find him the most congenial person in the world, I am quite capable of refraining from making any insulting remarks, particularly if it would bother you. He does have some positive traits; he just happens to advertise his most unpleasant ones." She huffed then. "At least he's no longer a Death Eater a real one, anyway. And if Albus could forgive him and allow him to work in a school full of children, then I can be collegial. Or try to be. I've never been able to forget what the Death Eaters did during the time after Severus took the Mark, though, and I always wonder . . . I wonder whose blood is on his hands. I may not know precisely what he did, but I still can't look at him and completely forget the kinds of things he must have done."

Minerva sighed. "I know. And I haven't forgotten all of that, but I have come to see Severus as someone who has grown beyond that time, someone who is doing all that he can to atone. And if Severus hadn't been there doing his master's will, someone else would have been, and at least he did come to Albus and offer his help. He came to regret what he had done, joining them, but it was only when his regret and revulsion became greater than his fear of . . . of *him*, that he could finally break away and turn to Albus and the Order. Of course, because of our suspicions that there was a spy within the Order, only Albus and I knew of his defection back at the time." Minerva blinked hard. "Who would have thought that, in the end, Pettigrew was the real traitor to us all, and that Severus Snape would be true to the Order . . . and to Lily . . . Pettigrew, who was included in their little group despite his less appealing personality and his lack of wit and talent, and Snape, who had been reviled by them. Snape did evil, but he knows it and is trying to make amends. Pettigrew was a traitor who did evil in betraying his friends, then he allowed an innocent man to be sent to Azkaban, and lay in wait all those years for the return of his master; Snape did evil and repented. All that he has done in the last fifteen years has been in pursuit of redemption, and what he does now when he returns to Voldemort, he does only because Albus requires it of him. If he could, Severus would leave it all behind him. And he believes he will die making amends, and he has accepted that." Minerva shook her head. "I will never truly understand him, but I have come to respect him and care for him. At first, I forgave him for myself, because I had to, despite all I knew or guessed of his activities as a Death Eater. Even when I couldn't bear the sight of him, I behaved as though he were simply another colleague, and soon, that is what he became, and my forgiveness . . . my forgiveness became genuine, and for his sake, not just for my own."

"You probably know far more about him and what he has done, the good and the bad, than I do, and if you have forgiven him, perhaps he is worthy of it," Poppy said.

"I believe he is worthy of it, but one can't only forgive those who are worthy. How are we to know, after all? And sometimes, it is the forgiveness that brings repentance. To withhold it can be to withhold the opportunity for repentance and atonement. In the end, it is the repentance and atonement that allows a person to become whole again. My forgiveness, or your forgiveness, or anyone else's, can open the door for a person to find redemption, and even if it does not, it can bring us healing as we forgive. At least, it did for me," Minerva finished quietly.

Poppy nodded in understanding. "I see that. And it is clear to me that he is devoted to Albus so much so, it is hard for me to understand how he continues to fool You-Know-Who. Although I suppose that his public demeanor is nasty and cold enough to perpetuate the belief that he is fooling Albus rather than You-Know-Who." Poppy hesitated, clearly torn about what she wanted to say next. "It's just . . . how do we know that he really is working against You-Know-Who? I know that Albus is not easily taken in, but look at what happened with Sirius and Pettigrew. Or even what Crouch did to Alastor. Of course, he took in all of us . . . I know that Albus isn't omniscient, and I don't expect him to be, but who's to say that he is not mistaken about Snape?"

"I am completely sure that he is not. I didn't have any real doubts before, but now, I am completely sure of Severus's loyalty. And not simply because he is paying dearly for it. I . . . Poppy, I have seen some parts of him these last few days which I don't think that even he had been aware of before." Minerva took a deep breath. "Please, if I tell you this, what was going on, you must not only promise me never to tell anyone of it, but also never to treat Severus differently than you do now you can't show him any pity or sympathy, and you can't be any kinder to him than you are now. He would feel humiliated if he knew that anyone else was aware of this. There are only two people other than Severus and I who know about this, and one of them doesn't know most of it. I feel . . . uncomfortable sharing this with anyone myself. Perhaps I shouldn't . . ."

"I promise, I will treat Severus with the same professionalism and collegiality I always have. And it seems as though you need to talk to someone about it. I presume that one of the others who knows about this is Albus. Who is the other? Lupin?"

"No." Minerva shook her head. "He knows something was up, that it is quite likely that I wasn't actually ill, but he doesn't know, nor does the person who went to Mongolia in Severus's stead. The other person who knows is actually a student; it was unavoidable. Fortunately, the student is completely reliable, I believe, and would do nothing that would hurt either Severus or me or that would endanger Severus's work for the Order."

"Well, I would guess it has to be Hermione Granger, then don't look so surprised, Minerva! It would have to be a student who had a knowledge, or at least a suspicion, about Snape's double role, and who is on the side of the Order, and that eliminates all but a few the Weasleys, Potter, Granger, and I can't think of any other students who would know. Potter clearly dislikes Snape, and although I think he could be trusted in theory with a secret of that sort, I can't imagine that you would say that he would do nothing to hurt Snape. I don't believe he would do or say anything that would openly endanger him, but if this is humiliating . . . well, I like Potter, but I do think he would be tempted to exploit that aspect of it. I think the Weasleys, Ginevra and Ronald, could be trusted, as well, but I think that he is likely to share whatever he knows with Potter or, at least, he would be tempted to and so I don't think you would describe him as 'completely reliable,' either. So that leaves Ginevra and Hermione. It was just a hunch, actually, that it is Hermione rather than Ginevra, but you confirmed it by your reaction."

"Hmmpf. I suppose I should just tell you the rest then . . . Last Friday, there was a quarrel between two Slytherins. Hermione was there and attempted to intervene. Draco Malfoy was also there, but as the two Slytherins were arguing over him, he found it amusing, apparently. Severus overheard the argument and came out of his office to see what was going on. To make a long story short, one of the Slytherins cast a spell aimed at Malfoy. Instead of hitting him, however, it struck Severus. At first, it seemed as though the spell had no untoward effects, and Severus disciplined the students and sent them on their way; however, after returning to his office, he began to feel peculiar. Because of the nature of the curse, he was uncomfortable going to see you, apparently, unsure of whether you could be discreet "

"What!? As though I would discuss a patient "

"Just forget about that for the moment, all right, Poppy? Anyway, Severus decided to come see me. He thought that perhaps the spell had been miscast or that because he wasn't the intended target, it had had some peculiar effect on him, and he thought perhaps I could help him find a counter-spell. When I opened the door to him, he took one look at me and arcs of colour shot from his body and he collapsed."

"Oh, my word! Whatever the spell was, it must have been waiting for a specific trigger before it took effect."

"Precisely." Minerva took a deep breath and swallowed before continuing. "Have you heard of the *Adfectus* class of spell?" At Poppy's nod, Minerva steeled herself, then

said, "The student had cast the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus* at Malfoy, and it hit Severus. When I opened the door, the spell was activated." She sat and waited while Poppy took in what she had said.

"Oh, my. And the *Actus* . . . but . . . this means . . . Oh, Minerva, I am so sorry I gave you such a hard time the other day in the infirmary. No wonder Severus was behaving so oddly." Then Poppy froze and her eyes widened. "There is only one known way to release someone from that spell."

Minerva nodded. "Yes. Only one way. And we found no other, despite our best effort."

Shock was written all over Poppy's face. When her friend said nothing, seeming to be struck speechless, Minerva said, "It has been a very difficult few days."

"I can only imagine," Poppy said with a whisper. "It . . . was it terrible?"

"No, not terrible. Not the way you are probably thinking. It was tiresome over those days to have Severus needing to express his feelings every hour or so, and his expressions increased in . . . their intimacy over time. But because of the effect of the spell, Severus . . . he was not his usual self. Although I came to miss that sharp, acerbic side to him." Minerva sighed. "And because I had a few days to become used to the idea, and to him, it was not too awful in the end. And he was released from the spell." Poppy had gone from looking shocked to looking distressed. "Really, Poppy, he tried to make it easy for me. It bothered him terribly that I had to . . . tolerate his affections. He offered several times to die rather than continue under the spell. He almost committed suicide, partly to free himself from the spell, but also to free me, and Albus, from his presence. This is how I am certain that Severus is truly on our side. And, as Albus said from the beginning, no truly Dark Wizard would have Minerva McGonagall as his true love." Minerva quirked a smile.

"Oh, I don't know what to say, Min! I am so sorry for you all. This must have been very difficult for all three of you. How did Albus handle it?"

"He was so concerned about me, and about Severus, as well, that he pushed aside his own feelings on the matter."

"Typical," said Poppy with a snort. "But I assume he was not happy with the situation."

"No, and I knew that he wasn't, but he had thought from the very start that it was likely that, well, that Severus and I would have to, you know, and he was very conscious that his distress at the thought could make things harder for me. He also was in his 'crisis mode,' and I don't think that he allowed himself to think too much about the personal aspects of the situation. It was only after . . . he felt inadequate, I suppose you could say, as though he should have been able to save me or protect me from this, and although I know that he has faith in my love for him, and that faith didn't waver, he worried that after having Severus in that way, I would not want him anymore, or that I would find Severus more . . . physically satisfying."

Poppy laughed shortly. "I cannot imagine that. Well, not to be unfair to Severus, of course, but I can't imagine you lusting after him when you have Albus, especially knowing how you feel about him. But I suppose I can see how Albus might feel insecure that way." She smirked. "May I gather from the little hearts on your neck that you reassured Albus of his . . . desirability?"

Minerva blushed and reflexively raised her hand to her throat, covering the intertwined hearts Albus had left her with. "Yes, you may gather that."

"Very nice job of it the hearts, I mean." Poppy's eyes danced with mirth. "I don't remember seeing anything quite like that before and especially not on Minerva McGonagall. Or is that why you wear high collars when you're teaching?"

"Oh, stop it!" Minerva said, but she smiled. "Albus actually left them just before he Flooed to get you. I was in the bedroom admiring them when you arrived. We had a bit of a . . . misunderstanding, I suppose you could say, earlier. He gave these to me in order to show that, well, that we belong together, I suppose. And since you know . . ." Minerva shrugged. "I usually put a Glamour over any marks, or even just cast a quick healing charm, whether they are anyplace where they would show or not. But after this week, and yesterday with Severus, it was just, I don't know."

"It was important to you to show to yourself, to him, and to someone else, that you two belong to one another, no matter what happens?" Poppy asked.

"Precisely. I don't know if I actually realised that, myself. But you are right. No one can ever come between us. I belong to Albus and he, to me, although he doesn't like using those terms, himself."

"I don't even know what to say to all this, Minerva. It must have been rather revolting to have to have, um, relations with Snape, even if you had become used to him over the past few days."

"I wouldn't say it was revolting, Poppy," Minerva said thoughtfully, wanting to explain to Poppy what she had experienced. "It would have been that first day, or any time early on. But it's not just that I became used to him and his touch, although that helped, but Albus advised me to try to enjoy it." Minerva ignored Poppy's astonished expression and continued. "And although I doubted I would be able to, I decided it was important for me not to feel used and degraded at the end, and I also didn't want Severus to feel as though he was grudgingly tolerated. Albus also said that Severus had experienced little love in his life and reminded me of what he had suffered over the last years; my compassion and my affection for Severus helped me to, not to *enjoy* it, but to accept it. I actually thought I might enjoy it more than I did in the end, that last day, since there were times over the last few days when Severus's attempts to bring me pleasure actually did that, but somehow I couldn't let go enough, and it was more of a physical exercise than anything else. I could scarcely wait for him to be done, to be honest."

"I can't imagine . . . but I suppose I see what you mean. You wouldn't want to feel like a prostitute, after all, so finding some meaning in it, some kind of connection between the two of you other than the necessity to free him from the curse, probably did help. But after all these years with Albus and knowing you as I do, I doubt you have ever seriously found another wizard attractive, except in a theoretical sort of way it still must have been emotionally difficult for you."

"It was. Oddly enough, or perhaps not oddly, it really only hit me entirely after it was all over, just as it did with Albus, though for different reasons. I know that Albus loves me, and I have never doubted his desire for me, but I feared that after doing this with Severus, Albus would find me sullied in some way. My rational self was telling me that was ridiculous, but I still feared that, and it wasn't helped by the fact that I felt disgusted with what I had done, as well. Not as I was doing it, but afterward, you know? I felt that I didn't want Albus to touch me until I was completely rid of Severus's touch, and at the same time, I wanted him to reassure me that he still wanted me. That was a part of our misunderstanding . . . he thought I needed time to myself, and he also worried that after having been with a younger wizard, I might not want him anymore. But we got through that together." Tears came to Minerva's eyes. "I have the most wonderful wizard in the world. He has been so perfect . . ." She raised her hand to her throat again. "Even after I said something unfairly to him this morning, he was more concerned with me and why I might have said it than he was with his own feelings, although I clearly hurt him. I didn't intend to . . . I just am still a bit on edge after this week, I suppose. There is so much that happened . . . I can't tell you all of it, Poppy, but it has been a very difficult several days."

Poppy nodded and reached across the table to rest her hand on her friend's. "I know that Albus will be returning soon, but why don't we sit together on the couch for a bit, and you can tell me whatever you feel comfortable with," she suggested. "And I would be happy to listen at any time."

Minerva nodded, and the two witches moved over to the sofa to talk, where Albus found them ten minutes later when he popped through the fireplace in a rush of green flame. He smiled when he saw them together; despite the traces of tears on Minerva's face, she looked relaxed and happy. She certainly was happy to see him, and she sprang from the couch and embraced him, leaning into his chest.

"Good afternoon, Poppy!" Albus said. "I'm glad to see that the two of you had a nice lunch." He kissed the top of Minerva's head. Uncharacteristically, Minerva's embrace wasn't just a quick hug that held the promise of more later when they were in private. Albus rubbed her back with his good hand.

"Hello, Albus. Yes, we had a nice lunch and a good talk. I'm glad that you sent me." Poppy smiled. "But I think that I need to get back to work now, and I'm sure you two would like time to yourselves."

Minerva stepped back and turned to Poppy. "I still have some things I'd like to talk to you about, but they'll keep for another day."

Poppy walked over to the fireplace to Floo back to the Headmaster's office. "You know I'm always happy to provide a friendly ear and to give advice, if asked!"

Minerva nodded and gave her friend a quick hug.

"Thank you, Poppy," Albus said, "I can see that this was one of my brighter ideas." He leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. "I am very glad Minerva has a friend like you."

Poppy blushed and said, "Well, Minerva has always been a good friend to me, as well, as have you, Albus. If you ever need to talk . . ." She knew he wouldn't talk to her, he never did, but it seemed the thing to offer.

"I appreciate that," Albus answered.

"Bye, Poppy, thanks again," Minerva said as her friend took a pinch of Floo-Powder from the container on the mantle.

After Poppy had left, Minerva turned and embraced Albus. They stood in relaxed silence for a while, then Albus said, "I presume from what you both said that you told Poppy about the spell."

"Yes. I hope you don't mind. I know we didn't talk about it, and perhaps we should have discussed it, but I honestly hadn't planned on telling her. It seemed too private and embarrassing, for one, but once she was here . . . I just needed to talk to someone who wasn't involved, I guess. And Hermione Granger, at barely seventeen, is hardly a candidate, not to mention that it would be an inappropriate thing to discuss with one of my students."

"It's fine. I didn't know whether you would tell her or not. I . . . I probably would have preferred that you didn't, if asked in advance, although I would not have asked you not to. But now that you have, I think it was good for you, and that is what matters." He kissed her forehead.

"It was. I didn't go into great detail, but it was good just to see that she was sympathetic but not . . . not horrified or disgusted by what I'd done. At least, not very. It helped me to feel as though it was the right thing for me to have done. Not that I had doubts about it, exactly, but I needed to feel that I was still me now . . ." She sighed. "That probably made no sense at all."

"Oh, it makes a sort of sense, my dear. You did something that, under ordinary conditions, would have been completely out of character for you. It isn't surprising that you need reassurance that you are still who you were before. And if I may give my opinion, I would say that you are even more you than you were! You once again showed yourself to be kind, caring, giving, and self-sacrificing, a truly good friend. You were heroic and generous. Everything that I and your friends have come to expect from Minerva McGonagall, as reserved as you so often may seem."

Minerva looked up at Albus and smiled. "And you were also heroic and generous, beyond what anyone in the wizarding world would possibly guess, despite their respect for you."

Albus bent forward and kissed her gently on the lips. "I would give everything for you; it was so hard to watch you have to go through that. I felt helpless."

"You were there for me throughout the time leading up to it, and you returned to me afterward you needn't mention the slight delay, Albus and you made me feel whole and helped me return to myself. You did help me, and you also helped Severus. I hope that he has some appreciation of that. Of course, he can't know exactly how generous you were," Minerva said.

"How so?"

"Well, he is not one of those who knows the extent of our relationship. He knows we have been together for decades, but he doesn't know we're actually married. Not that that should matter, of course."

Albus's expression froze, and Minerva pulled back to look at him.

"Does he know, then?" Minerva asked, puzzled. "How? I had thought that not only weren't we telling anyone else, but that it was dangerous for Severus to know in case Voldemort somehow caught a glimpse of it. From what you say, Voldemort still doesn't realise that we are together, although he no doubt has some notion that I'm important to you, but I thought you believed that it might be more difficult for Severus to hide this from him."

"I told him," Albus responded quietly. "After he came out of the guest room yesterday. I hadn't planned it, but it was on my mind, and . . . I was not careful. I asked how you were, and I referred to you as my wife. I am sorry."

Minerva stepped away from him, somewhat stunned, and went to sit on the sofa, leaving room and patting the cushion beside her.

"I am sorry, Minerva," Albus repeated as he sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "I don't think that Tom will see that. Severus will need to deposit these memories in a Pensieve until he is able to quiet the emotions around them, anyway. I have faith that his Occlumency will keep Tom out of all of his memories surrounding these events, including that fact."

"That's not . . . I am not worried about that. At least, not at the moment. It's just . . . I didn't think he knew. I don't even know how I feel about this." She looked confused. Suddenly she turned to him. "Oh, poor Severus! Oh, Albus, I wish you hadn't, for his sake. He already was humiliated by the entire thing, and he certainly felt that he owed both of us a debt incapable of repayment. That must have disturbed him terribly." She shook her head, an expression of sorrow on her face. "Why didn't you watch your words as usual, Albus? You never call me your wife when speaking with others. Not even with family. You rarely even refer to it when we're together, although that might be a bit strange, actually, but still . . . it's such a habit with you. I don't understand it!"

"I think . . ." Albus took a deep breath and let it out. "I think I was feeling insecure, as you are aware, and there was a part of me that wanted him to know just how great a sacrifice this was for both of us, and, as ashamed as I am to admit it, that you had chosen me and he couldn't have you."

"Oh, Albus! He knew that and *hedoesn't* want me. Not now that the spell is gone. He still cares for me all right, he loves me but he has no desire to be with me in that way, I am sure. Or what little desire he may still have is overshadowed by everything else in his life. And even if I were free, I don't think he'd want to pursue anything with me. You didn't need to tell him we're married." She leaned her head back and looked at the ceiling, turning it all over in her mind. "I am sorry you felt insecure, Albus, and I know that you are past that, but that it was in that moment that your emotions overcame your caution . . . it's just . . . unfortunate. But I understand. After all," she said, looking at Albus and touching his shoulder fondly, "I didn't want to cover the marks, which is my habit, and I hadn't even given it a thought. Of course, I was only seeing Poppy, who already knows about us. But I still understand the urge you must have felt. And since you didn't want to recognise that you were having problems with the situation, it wouldn't have occurred to you to be extra careful in your choice of words."

"If it's any consolation, Minerva, I think that even though he was upset initially, Severus recovered quickly. It certainly couldn't have been a complete shock, after all, if a couple has been together for almost forty years, that they might have got married at some point . . ."

"I know," Minerva said with a sigh, leaning her head against him wearily. "I just keep thinking . . . this spell changed something in Severus, it is bound to continue having an effect on him, and this added fact . . . it seems that it might come back to haunt us, though I don't know how."

Albus pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. "I hope not. I don't see how. He has always been loyal to the Order to me. I don't think this will change anything."

Minerva shrugged. "I don't know." She looked up at Albus and smiled. "But *Ido* know that we have some time together, and I truly do not want to think about or talk about Severus or anything else serious." She stroked his cheek and kissed him lightly. "I think another nap is in order."

Kissing her gently, Albus stood, bringing her with him. "I think the bed for this nap, not the couch this time." His eyes twinkled.

"I really do mean a nap, Albus," Minerva answered, but she smiled, too.

"So do I, my dear, I just think the bed might be more comfortable."

"Mmm." Minerva kissed him, then led him into the bedroom.

Several floors below Albus and Minerva, Severus was decanting the last of the potion into a small brown bottle. Three rows of ten bottles were set out neatly on his soapstone work table, and an expression of satisfaction crossed his face. There was a beauty to brewing, and a satisfaction to bottling a well-made potion, that teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts could never rival. Of course, *teaching* Potions was somewhat different from *brewing* potions, but there was the occasional student who was better than the average dunderhead. Unfortunately, unless that student was in Slytherin, it was difficult for him to do anything to encourage her or him. He would have enjoyed nurturing Hermione Granger's talent in potions, for example. He smirked, remembering her "lesson" to Pansy Parkinson. Even encouraging her in Defence could be satisfying, he thought, but it would be difficult to do so without raising suspicions and having word get back to the Dark Lord that he was coddling a Gryffindor, let alone a friend of Potter's. The situation with Parkinson was different. It had been clear to the Slytherins that he had singled her out for humiliation, and what better way to do that than to use a Gryffindor? Hermione was no doubt seen as merely his tool to humiliate her for some infraction.

Severus sighed. It would soon be time for him to teach Minerva's class. Sixth-year Transfiguration. Albus had given him the lesson plan at lunch. Nothing he couldn't handle, if the students' questions weren't too theoretical, but there were only a few students who might have the intelligence to formulate such a question, and those students were likely to be intelligent enough not to ask it of him. It was quite probable that no one would say anything at all to him, except in answer to one of his questions. It was not a class he would prefer to teach, particularly given the presence of Potter in the class, but it was the least he could do to repay Minerva. What he owed her . . . what he owed her, he could never repay. And she would never demand repayment. She had said that they were friends, and that she had done what she did out of friendship.

Severus began to move the bottles into a small wooden crate, and his hand shook. He would need to ignore what had happened, what Minerva had done for him, put it out of his mind, just as he had sequestered away all of the evil he had done. He was doing what he could to atone for his misdeeds; allowing them to plague him constantly served no useful purpose. If he didn't set this aside, it might keep him from acting effectively against the Dark Lord, and that had been the entire reason for his existence these last fifteen years. What had begun as fear, regret, and disgust, and then moved on to become terror at what he had set in motion, had, over the intervening years, turned to genuine remorse. There was still regret and disgust, of course, and if he weren't afraid, he would be a fool, but what drove him was not fear of what might happen to him or what he might lose, but remorse for what he had done and a desire to try to make it right. Not that what he had done could ever be excused or rectified, but before he died, he might be able to do more good than he had done evil. Somehow, though, Severus didn't think that good and evil could be measured that way, and that the most he could hope for would be to die without hating himself. Albus spoke of redemption and forgiveness, and although one small part of him hoped there were such things, Severus found it difficult to believe in them.

He hefted the box in his arms; the potion, despite its indefinite shelf-life, was sensitive to magic, and he preferred not to Levitate it all the way to the Hospital Wing. A slight smile crossed his lips. This potion was hard to come by both because of the rarity of the ingredients and the skill required to brew it. There would be dozens of patients who would benefit from the work he had done that day. It was effective against several magical diseases, not only against febrile magical distemper, far more effective than most of the other potions in use. Severus felt an unaccustomed sense of warmth creep over him as he thought of the patients and their families. He wasn't entirely sure what it was he was feeling, even upon reflection, but it was not a bad sensation. It was rather like the satisfaction that he felt when he brewed the potion, but it was more than that. Unbidden, the memory arose in Severus's mind of Hermione's face when she realised that the second box of chocolates were for her. It was something like that feeling, actually, the feeling he'd had when she had smiled at him in her surprise and delight. And not unlike the feeling that had come over him when she had winked at him that second time, last night in his office.

Severus gritted his teeth. There was no point in remembering that, either. Whatever Albus had said about "allies within the Order," by the time that Hermione was a member of the Order, he would either be dead or wish he were, spending all of his days and nights as a Death Eater. And she would believe him a traitor. As would Minerva. Severus suspected that the reason that Albus didn't tell Minerva yet about the Unbreakable Vow and his plans to deal with it or not to deal with it, more accurately was that he would find it too difficult to carry out if he did. Minerva would not stand for it, and if he persisted anyway, Minerva would be made very unhappy by it. Severus could understand wanting to protect Minerva from unhappiness, but he thought that she might be more unhappy, in the end, not knowing. If she didn't figure out that it had all been a plot between the two of them, she would still have to deal with the loss of Albus and with his own apparent betrayal of Dumbledore, of her, and of the Order, and if she did figure it out, which she might well do, she would feel betrayed by them both.

Biting back a sigh, Severus approached the Hospital Wing and saw the matron coming toward him from the other direction. He could not think about this now, but he determined he would increase his efforts to have Albus find an alternative to the one he seemed resigned to. And he would continue his work on a more effective potion for the curse on Albus's hand, despite Albus's instructions for him not to "waste his time" on it.

"Madam Pomfrey." Severus nodded at the school matron.

"Professor." Poppy nodded in response. "That's the potion?"

"Yes, thirty bottles, each a quarter litre."

"I think I will keep one of the bottles for Hogwarts, possibly two, and send the rest on to St. Mungo's." Poppy removed the light ward on the door to her office and opened it. "I know they will appreciate it, but they are also paying us for it. The Headmaster has authorised seventy percent of the payment to go to you, with the rest to Hogwarts. Would you prefer it to be deposited to your Gringott's account or to have it in cash? Cash would be convenient," she said, without saying for whom it would be convenient. She closed the door behind them.

"As you say, cash is convenient," Severus replied, placing the heavy box on her desk. "I repeat what you likely know, but this potion is sensitive to magic, and it would be best not to Levitate it or to transport it via Apparition. Portkey or Floo should be fine, however, if it is well cushioned."

"I had actually thought to send it via the Hogsmeade train into London, but it would be easier to send it via Portkey or Floo. I will let Healer Fastnott know; he can send someone for it."

Severus nodded and turned to leave.

"I just saw Minerva, Professor, and I thought you might like to know that she is doing well."

Severus moved his head slightly. "Really."

"I thought you might like to know, since you've been gone from the castle and you were here when she took that potion."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey, but I had no doubt that she was quite well. I was very aware that she was not genuinely ill, after all."

"Of course. She will return to her teaching on Tuesday, I believe."

Severus nodded, still not turning to face her.

"Well, thank you again for brewing this potion. It is sure to help many folk recover from some very nasty illnesses."

"Indeed. Good afternoon, Madam Pomfrey."

"Good afternoon, Professor."

Poppy stared at the door after the wizard in midnight robes had closed it behind him. She still could not completely comprehend what it was that Minerva had to do with him in order to free him from the spell, let alone what she must have endured spending five days with him. Of course, Minerva had emphasised that the spell had caused Severus to shed his nasty persona, but it was hard for Poppy to imagine that there was anything at all underneath that mask. Not that he was nasty with the staff well, he was, but it was more in the form of barbed wit accompanied by a superior sneer than it was the kind of nastiness she heard that he inflicted on the students but it seemed as though the man had no life outside his work and no personality beyond his bat-of-the-dungeons persona. But if Minerva was a true love . . . Poppy shook her head. She understood what Minerva had meant when she said that a truly Dark Wizard could never have loved Minerva McGonagall; there must be something beneath that sneer and those voluminous robes other than a reformed Death Eater. And something behind those dark eyes of his, something other than black, cavernous emptiness . . .

A shudder went through Poppy. She turned to the box of carefully bottled potion, preparing to send twenty-eight bottles to St. Mungo's, where it could do good and save lives, and wondered about the wizard who had brewed it.

Minerva rolled over slightly, waking to the reassuring weight and warmth of Albus lying beside her, his magic tingling slightly against hers. They had changed into their nightwear, but the sheet that they had pulled up was now only covering their legs. Careful not to disturb his right arm, which encircled her, she turned fully to face him and bury her face in his chest.

"Awake, my sweet one?"

Minerva looked up. "I thought you were still asleep."

"No, I've been enjoying watching you, though," he said softly.

"Did you sleep?"

"Yes, some. It was lovely to lie here and feel you next to me, smelling your hair and hearing you snore "

He was interrupted by a gentle poke to his ribs. "Albus Dumbledore! I do not snore!"

"Of course not, my dear . . . you merely . . . breathe somewhat forcefully," he teased.

"Hmpf! Well, you could always move to another room or cast a charm on your ears if it bothers you!"

"Oh, I prefer to hear you snore er, breathe heavily it's comforting. It really is, believe it or not." He pressed his lips against her forehead. "Though I did tell a little bit of a fib. You only snored briefly this afternoon; you stopped some time ago."

Minerva laughed slightly and put her arm around him. "I can almost be grateful to Parkinson this afternoon for having given us this time together. I miss you terribly, Albus. I try not to let it show, because I know you have to do what you have to do, and I don't want to make it any harder on you, but there are times when I just . . . it almost feels as though I am starving. I need you so, just to be with me, near me, to hear your voice, to be able to see you." She sighed with contentment. "To lie close to you like this." She snuggled against him.

"I miss you, too, when I am away, but I suppose it is different. I know what I am doing and that I will be returning to you, and you must simply wait here. I am sorry it is so hard for you, but it makes me doubly glad that we have this time together now. I am glad you told me, though. I had wondered whether you were so used to it, to me, to my comings and goings, that you didn't really notice when I was gone. I believed you were happy when I returned, of course." He smiled. "You always made that very clear. But I thought perhaps that I had so neglected you and our life that one price I was paying was that you no longer noticed my absence."

"Well, I won't make things hard on you by trying to hold you back next time you prepare to leave even though I sometimes wish I could just hold onto you and not let go but I will remind you that I will miss you and will be waiting for your return to me."

"Mmm." He kissed her hair. "I love you, Minerva. Those words seem so inadequate for what I feel for you, they always have, and that hasn't changed except to grow more true."

Minerva raised her head and looked into his eyes. "I know. I feel the same."

She kissed his mouth, gently rolling him over onto his back, continuing to kiss him, moving her hands up to hold his face in her hands, lying on top of him, glad for his solidity beneath her. As her lips drew his into her mouth one more time and her tongue lightly licked them, Albus moaned, and the vibration caused a thrill to pass through her. He had put his left arm around her, and his hand was gently caressing her back, and now her legs, then pulling her nightgown up and cupping her buttocks before gently caressing her legs again, then straying between them. She felt his fingers lightly stroking her inner thigh, where he knew she was so sensitive, and her kiss grew more passionate, and when his fingers moved higher, she broke away to gasp.

"I thought we were just going to . . . take a nap . . . oohh," she said. "Oh, Albus, you shouldn't."

"Mmm. Just lie still, my love." He had put his right arm around her, and his left hand traced a path again from her thighs to her crux and back down again. "Just relax here." He kissed her temple before she turned her head again and began to kiss him once more.

His fingers caressed her inner thighs, first one, then the other, always pausing in their circuit to stroke her crux briefly. Soon, Minerva was gasping between kisses, and her pulse was pounding. She moaned finally, saying his name, and his teasing touches became more fervent until they focussed solely on her folds and her nub, with occasionally explorations of her entrance.

When Minerva made a move as if to sit up or roll over, Albus pressed his right arm against her back and whispered, "Lie still, my love, lie still and feel . . ."

Finally, Minerva was panting against his chest as his fingers quickened their strokes, and she was gripping his shoulders tightly.

"You are my love, my one love, my dearest, my sweet delight, my Minerva," he murmured, "and I love to touch you, to feel you breathe against me, and to hear you gasp in pleasure. My love, my love, my Minerva."

As his words flowed over her, her right hand moved to his head and wound itself in his hair. "Gods, yes, Albus . . ." Her words were lost in moans, and she came, and he did not cease his strokes until her final shudder and she had relaxed against him.

When her breathing had quieted, she sighed his name, then said, "I did not kiss you so that you would do that . . . I wasn't looking for that, especially after this morning."

"But it was nice?"

"Mmm, very nice don't mistake me. Very, very nice. I just don't want you to think . . . well, I had said just a nap." She turned her head to look up at him.

"I know, and I didn't plan it, either, but sometimes the very best things are spontaneous, don't you agree?" He smiled at her; her eyes were still somewhat glazed. "And I do so enjoy playing with you . . . spontaneously."

Minerva smiled. "I am actually surprised that I had any 'play' left in me after this morning."

"A little food, a little sleep, a little unanticipated spontaneity . . . I wouldn't have been disappointed if it had turned out I had exhausted your 'play' this morning, but I was delighted I hadn't." His eyes twinkled naughtily.

"It's you. You have that effect on me."

"It is still a wonder to me; especially after all these years, I would think you would have grown so accustomed to me . . . that it would be hard work."

"For you or for me?" Minerva asked with a laugh. "I love you and you love me, so that is a lot of it, but I think that part of it lies in what you said just now how you enjoy playing spontaneously. That keeps it from being anything I could just grow accustomed to."

"You know, I was going to keep this a secret, but I don't think I can . . . I have some more of that Polyjuice, and a few more envelopes of the final ingredient that Wilspy gathered for me. I thought that over the weekend, we might make use of it. If you are agreed, of course."

Minerva rolled over and lay next to him, and began tracing patterns on his chest. "I hate knowing that the transition is painful for you, but if you would like to, I did enjoy it very much, and I know you did, as well. But only if you want to. Don't do it just for me."

"All right, then. Next time the mood strikes, we'll do it."

"I do hope you see from what you did just now that one hand is more than sufficient to 'play' with me," Minerva said, her eyes bright. "It's you I react to, you know, Albus, whether you have me bent over the arm of the couch pretending to be a naughty witch with a dirty mouth or you simply are holding me on top of you, telling me that you love me as you touch me with one hand." She caressed his cheek. "But the Polyjuice would be nice, too. And it is good not to have to worry whether I am hurting your hand."

"You are the most extraordinary " Albus's words were lost in a kiss, and it was some time later before they rose and pulled on their dressing gowns to take supper in the sitting room.

Author's Note: This was the last chapter of An Act of Love, but there is still an epilogue to come, so the story is not complete yet. A sequel, rather different from this story in its style, structure, and focus, is in the works, as well.

By the way, if you are interested in seeing a more "adept" Snape, you might like to check out [Heat](#), a lemony one-shot featuring our snarky Potions master during a heatwave. He just gets things even hotter.

Epilogue

Chapter 16 of 16

Severus contemplates his future, Hermione pays Severus a visit, and Minerva waits.



Epilogue

Severus closed his grades ledger with a sharp snap and put it in the warded drawer in his desk. As he did so, another parchment caught his eye, and with mixture of reluctance and a curious sense of warmth, he withdrew it from its resting place. He had put it there after Albus had handed it to him several weeks before and had not looked at it since. Not precisely true, he thought. He had looked at it each time he had occasion to open the drawer, but he had not taken it out and opened it. Yet despite seeing it almost daily, the parchment continued to catch his notice, and today, for a reason he could not have articulated even if asked, he removed the parchment and unfolded it.

A list of potions ingredients, it seemed to be, and in his hand. No doubt charmed by Minerva. Albus had said that the password remained the same. Severus raised his eyes from the parchment and with a slight flick of his wrist, he cast a *Colloportus* on the door, followed by an *Imperturbable*, not that he planned to begin talking to himself, he thought mirthlessly, nor to read the letter aloud, but one could never be too careful.

"Phoenix," he whispered, and the words on the page shimmered a moment before reforming themselves into the letter he had received at the end of September.

"Dear Professor Snape:

"I hope you are well and that you will forgive my impertinence. I was going to give this book to Professor Dumbledore after lunch, but could not find him, so I decided to give it to you, instead.

"I overlooked this text yesterday evening when doing my research. It may not be useful, but in case it holds any valuable information at all, I thought I should pass it on. The section that I found most relevant begins on page 114.

"I do hope that you have no need of this book, but in the event that you do, I hope that you have someone helping you. From what I read yesterday, the spell can affect cognition and judgment.

"I am sorry that I was unable to stop the argument before things got out of hand. I hope that you have come to no harm.

"Sincerely,

"Hermione Granger"

Gryffindor witch. Another bloody Gryffindor witch. Severus twitched a smile. There was something about certain Gryffindor witches. Lily had been one. And Minerva.

Hermione Miss Granger was, of course different. She was his student. And he, he was different than he had been. Perhaps even with Lily, he had still been redeemable . . . at least until he had done the unforgivable. No, not unforgivable, perhaps, but she had never lived to forgive him. Not that it would have mattered. He had seen to that. Now, in retrospect, he saw that it had been his choices that had led to Lily's choice, and she had chosen *Potter*. But Minerva had forgiven him; she had said that he was redeemable. And he had worked toward atonement. That had been in the past, though . . . his "atonement" might, in the end, include the unforgivable. Even for Minerva. Especially for Minerva.

Severus shook himself. Whatever his relationships with the former two Gryffindors might have been, whatever had been left unfulfilled or would be forever unforgiven, Miss Granger would never know of all his acts of atonement, of his regrets, of his despair. She believed him a hero, and she would be sorely disillusioned. She would only know of the unforgivable. But only if it came to that. Perhaps it wouldn't.

Severus allowed himself a slight sigh. He had attempted over the last weeks to dissuade Dumbledore from the current course of action, with even greater urgency and desperation than he had during the summer. He did not understand why the Headmaster was so bent on that single course of action. With both of them working on a different solution, surely there had to be one. And if Minerva were enlisted, as well . . . but mention of Minerva in this context had only angered Dumbledore, and Severus was certain that he had discussed nothing of his condition or of their plans with the witch. That would have to change, Severus thought. He would see to it that it did. He would not do the unforgivable or if he did, it would be an act of omission and not one of commission. For himself, for Minerva, even for Albus . . . and perhaps for another Gryffindor witch.

Minerva paced her sitting room. Albus was late again. She had expected him hours before. Each time that he left on one of his jaunts, she worried that he might not return, and her worry would grow as the time approached for his return, and when he was delayed, her worry increased to intense anxiety. She normally held the wards and at his return, he would take them back. Lately, though, he would arrive tired, depleted, and he would leave the wards with her rather than taking them back as soon as he was on the grounds, so she wouldn't even know he had returned until she actually saw him. Minerva thought that the curse on his hand might be affecting his general health and his energy, but Albus claimed that it was no worse, and he was merely finally showing the signs of his age. She still wished that he would see a Healer, but he had had Severus help him as soon as the curse had struck him, and she knew that Severus was still brewing a potion for him. Albus stubbornly refused to let a Healer see him, not even Melina, despite the fact that Minerva's niece specialised in spell-damage and curses.

And the other spell that she had found in one of the books they had used when doing research to try to find a counter-curse for the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*, Albus would not consider that one at all. The last time she had mentioned using it trying to emphasise that it would be for the other effects of the spell, and not the primary one Albus had kissed her lightly on the cheek, told her that he knew how she felt about him, and how he felt, himself, and there was no need for any spell. He wouldn't even listen to her arguments regarding the benefits they might attain, or the possibility of a cure for his afflicted hand. Minerva simply didn't understand his attitude. After almost forty years together, she knew that he didn't doubt her love or her constancy, even if he occasionally experienced some other insecurities, so it was difficult for her to believe that he might worry that she had some other "greatest love." That, however, was the only explanation she could imagine. Why else would he forego the possibility of a cure for his cursed hand? The fact that their wands were mated and their magic so mutually resonant only reinforced Minerva's belief that they might be able to cure his hand, make him whole again, if they were to use the spell. There were recorded instances of similar occurrences, after all, though none were identical to their own situation.

She would speak with him about it again when he returned. If necessary, she would have someone else cast the spell on her, take him unawares . . . but that plan made Minerva feel ill. She did not wish to force something on Albus that he did not want. And it was possible that, despite all he had always said to her, that he did not believe that *she* was his greatest love, and the side effects of the spell, the ones she wished to exploit, were strongest when the greatest love was reciprocal. Perhaps he was fearful of that, or even knew it, and did not wish to hurt her by having her learn that. Minerva swallowed hard. Even if that were the case, forty years of being together, of loving one another, that meant more to her than whether there had at some point in the past been some other love of his whom he had loved more, who had been his greatest love. Dervilia, perhaps, who had died before Albus was even twenty. And even were that the case, Minerva thought they still might be able to effect a cure for his hand, since they were so close in so many other ways.

Minerva nodded to herself. She would find a way to persuade him to try it, but she wouldn't . . . she wouldn't ambush him and have the spell cast on her without his consent.

Hermione Granger sat in the Gryffindor common room, ostensibly reading a large old tome on Arithmancy, knowing that no one would bother her if it appeared that she was engrossed in something they found dull. She had come down to escape the boys again. They had all been up in the sixth-year boys' room, and the conversation had once again turned to Snape Professor Snape, she reminded them. Harry still unreasonably blamed Professor Snape for his godfather's death and, it seemed, for just about every other ill that had befallen him since he had arrived at Hogwarts. Hermione had tried to point out each instance in which they had thought that Professor Snape had been up to no good and it had turned out that they had been wrong, but neither Harry nor Ron would listen to her. She agreed that he was not the most pleasant person, nor the most agreeable teacher, but he was in the Order, and Dumbledore trusted him.

Neither of the boys had listened to her arguments, and she had finally left, feeling somewhat sick. She knew more of Professor Snape than they did, and she knew of more reasons to trust him, but she could share none of them. And, Hermione feared, even if she were to break confidences and tell Harry and Ron, neither of them would believe her or they would turn it around somehow and make it one more reason he shouldn't be trusted. They would likely make fun of him, too, and she couldn't bear that thought. She knew that Professor Snape was more affected by their jibes than he let on and more than she would have thought a grown wizard would be. They were just two stupid schoolboys.

What had finally made her leave their company, though, was the sudden desire for her to yell at Harry and tell him that if it was anyone's fault but Voldemort's that his godfather had died, then it was *his* fault. He had rushed off and done something completely mad of course, she had gone with him, how could she not? and he had not done anything sensible. Harry never stopped to think. Professor Snape was right about that, at least in the case of some Gryffindors: they didn't think, they just acted. And sometimes it turned out for the best. But sometimes, it did not.

Hermione turned a page, her eyes not seeing the words or symbols, but remembering the things she had done to help Harry. She wanted to help Harry primarily because he was her friend and he was a great wizard, or would be, someday, but as she got older, other motivations became equally strong: to fight Voldemort, to prove herself to the wizarding world, to shake off that last tiny shred of doubt that she had that perhaps she wasn't as good a witch because she was Muggle-born though she would never voice such a thing. But she had helped Severus Snape, too . . . and when Hermione thought about that, she shoved her thoughts aside. It was bad enough that one of the last things out of a red-faced Ron's mouth was the taunt that soon she was going to get a crush on the greasy git if she weren't careful.

She didn't have a crush on him. Her reasons for helping Professor Snape had been complicated, but primarily, she couldn't bear to see someone suffer, regardless of who they were. After Pansy had cast that spell and she saw the sparks fly from Professor Snape's body, she had been horrified, first because someone had cursed a teacher (not that she hadn't done the same thing once, and on the same teacher), but also because he had been an innocent victim of someone else's argument. It later turned out that he hadn't been quite as innocent as she had thought, but even so, he hadn't deserved to have that spell placed on him, nor the accompanying humiliation. He had let her help him, though, this wizard who seemed so disdainful of any help from any quarter, and particularly disdainful of Gryffindors. She had actually believed that he would hate her when the spell was lifted and he remembered his behaviour and that she had witnessed it. Nonetheless, she had gone to see him, hoping that perhaps he wouldn't despise her for having seen him at his weakest, and wanting to see for herself that he was truly freed from the spell.

Much to her surprise and delight, Professor Snape had not been nasty to her. He hadn't even tried to pretend that nothing had happened. Her face grew warm as she remembered how he had wished her the enjoyment of her chocolates, the ones he had given her. She still had some, their Charmed box keeping them fresh. She couldn't very well explain where she had received a heart-shaped box of sweets, so she hadn't shared them, taking them from her trunk only when her roommates weren't present. She rationed them, each time she had one, remembering how Professor Snape had given them to her: he had tears in his eyes when he saw that she had put thought into the purchase, trying to do for him what he himself could not. And when he left, he had paid her a compliment. It was a compliment coming from him, anyway. She was not as big a dunderhead as the students he usually taught. Hermione smiled to herself and turned another page.

When she had gone to see him after he had supposedly returned from China Hermione supposed that they had Polyjuiced someone to go in his stead, since he had been

seen coming and going, and she was quite sure it hadn't been he. Hermione went with a bold and hopeful heart, though completely believing that he would turn her away, that he might even be cruel to her. She remembered again how he had once said he had "seen no difference" when she had been inadvertently cursed with the *Densaugo* spell, and a slight knot formed in the pit of her stomach at the memory, but then she thought of how he had allowed her to visit him in his office, warding the door behind them so that they could not be overheard. The knot evaporated completely, replaced with a growing warmth.

He had even thanked her, more or less, for her help, and even given her an apology of sorts. And he hadn't been afflicted by the curse when he had done so. And, she thought, her warmth growing, he had called her "Hermione." More than once. He had said that they couldn't see each other again like that, and that he would have to return to treating her as he always had. Indeed, he seemed even more distant than usual, scarcely looking at her, and never seeming to notice when she performed a spell well. But that didn't bother her. She knew that she had his approval. Somehow, those few occasions when their eyes met, she could tell that she still had his approval and his acceptance. Perhaps even some affection.

Hermione snapped her book shut. Now that was ridiculous. If she went on this way, Ron would be right, and she would have a crush on him. Not that that was a possibility. She was too sensible to have crushes, particularly on teachers. Particularly on not-very-good-looking teachers with bad hair and teeth worse than her own used to be, teachers who were Death Eaters. But he wasn't a Death Eater, not really. He was a hero.

Hermione stood and went up to her room, bringing her book with her. Fortunately, no one else was present, and she went to her wardrobe, pulled out her heart-shaped box of chocolates, and ate one. A lovely truffle. She looked at them, her gaze going unfocussed for a moment, then she Summoned some clean parchment and carefully wrapped a half dozen of the sweets in it, folding the parchment like a small envelope or packet.

She closed up her wardrobe again, opened her book bag and carefully placed the wrapped chocolates on top. She always readied her bag the night before, so the next day's books and supplies were inside, including her Defence Against the Dark Arts essay. If she required an excuse, that would be it.

Hermione left Gryffindor Tower as quickly as she could. No one called to her or wondered where she was going. They likely all thought she was headed for the library. There was still an hour and a half before curfew. She had time. And she would go to the library if he wasn't in his office.

She went down several flights of stairs, trying not to think about what she was doing. Catching herself, she almost laughed. Another Gryffindor acting without thought. She wouldn't seek him in the dungeons, of course, but if he were in his Defence office, there was no harm in stopping by. If he seemed displeased to see her, she wouldn't leave the chocolates. That was silly, anyway. But if he didn't seem to mind . . .

Severus replaced the charm on the parchment, returning it to a list of potions ingredients, then put the letter back in his drawer. He was just closing it when he heard someone knock. He closed his eyes. He was not there. The door was still warded, so he rose and went to it, listening. He heard shuffling feet. Just one pair. A female, he thought. He sighed. Umbridge was no longer at the school. The person could be no more dreadful than she had been. Probably a first-year Slytherin missing home. Hardly anyone else sought him out in his office. There was one more light, very tentative tap on the door, then he heard footsteps begin to walk away. He shook his head, and against his better judgment, he opened the door.

Hermione turned around and saw him. She smiled brightly. One of the few people ever to smile when they saw him, and the only student to do so without some ulterior motive. At least he doubted she had an ulterior motive.

"Miss Granger. It is late. What are you doing lurking about outside of doors?" he asked, a chill in his voice, though it was more of an effort than usual.

"I came to see you about the essay, sir. If you have time. I took a different approach, and I wasn't sure whether it was all right. If it's not, I will have to rewrite it tonight."

"Hmmp. A little late to be worried about that now, isn't it, Miss Granger? But get in here."

When Hermione was in the room, he closed the door behind them and, without thinking about why he was doing so, he recast the *Colloportus* and *Imperturbable*. Odd that she should have appeared just when he was thinking of her, and of his own lost soul. He sat back down behind his desk.

He gestured to a chair. "You may be seated."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione perched on the edge of the seat.

"You wished to discuss your essay?"

Hermione, emboldened by the fact that he had cast the wards, said, "Not exactly, sir. I did take a different approach, but I don't want to rewrite the essay. I just . . ." She was suddenly overwhelmed with nervousness. What had she been thinking? She had even just abandoned her only plausible excuse.

"Yes?" Professor Snape just stared at her, waiting.

"I was just . . . well, someone mentioned your name, and I was thinking about you, that's all. I just . . . wanted to see how you are."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "You see me every day, Miss Granger. Do I appear unwell to you?"

Hermione blushed and stammered, "No, no . . . not at all, no, I just . . . I'm sorry, sir."

She began to rise.

"Sit back down." He didn't want to think about why he was asking her to stay. He had no need of friends, particularly not another Gryffindor, and most certainly not a student. But she was better than some, both Gryffindors and students. "I am well, thank you, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded. She really had no idea what had possessed her to believe this was a good idea. Simply because she had been thinking about him, remembering when he had behaved toward her in a way that was not typical for him . . . And he had told her, firmly, that they could have no more conversations of a personal nature. He hadn't even used those terms. But he had been clear that they were to behave as they always had, and she had agreed. It was the only way to behave. And it wasn't as though they were friends, even if she did happen to know some things about him that almost no one else did, even if she had seen tears in his eyes. Professor Snape had been kind to her, generously so, even if it was perhaps out of his own self-interest so that she wouldn't turn on him and betray his secrets. She would never do that, but she could understand that he might not trust her. He had so few people whom he could trust. Suddenly, as daft as it still seemed to her, Hermione was glad she had come, whether it was wise or not, and whether he wanted her there or not. She met his gaze.

"I doubt that it was the mere *mention* of my name that brings you here tonight, however," Severus said. "May I gather that your . . . friends were discussing me and my general sweet nature?" He tried to keep the sarcasm from his voice, but did not succeed.

"Some people were talking about you, that's all. I just wanted to see you." Hermione picked up her book bag. "And I brought you a little something. I thought . . . everyone likes a little surprise, after all." She took the small packet of sweets from her bag and placed them on his desk. "They're from what you gave me. Ones I thought you might like."

The corner of Severus's mouth twitched. "Are there any of those chocolate-covered coffee beans?"

"Three. Three of those, two mocha truffles, and one dark chocolate truffle, sir."

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Miss Granger."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"Yes, well, I suppose I should go," Hermione said. "I just wanted to see you." She kept repeating herself, she thought. Professor Snape must think her one of the bigger dunderheads he had to teach.

"It is nice to see you, as well," Severus said softly.

"I wanted you to know . . ." What had she wanted him to know? "To know that I still appreciate all you do, and that knowing you are in the Order gives me hope every day." He was still listening, looking at her expressionlessly. "And that you have friends." Hermione blushed.

Severus lowered his gaze and looked away from her. "Thank you."

"I wish . . ." Hermione summoned every ounce of Gryffindor courage and continued. "I wish that I could remind you every day that you have friends, and I wish I could offer more friendship than just some chocolates. But I wanted you to know. And it doesn't matter what happens later. I know that appearances can be deceiving."

She stood as Severus looked up at her again. "Perhaps you should shout at me after we open the door, sir. Just in case there's someone around. Or for the sake of the portraits."

Severus nodded and stood himself. "Your visit was welcome, Hermione. Today. For today."

Hermione agreed. "Yes, today. I won't make a habit of this. Thank you for seeing me, Professor."

"Thank you for the chocolates, Hermione . . . and the other."

When Severus opened the door, he shouted at her about being a bothersome little know-it-all who couldn't write an adequate essay if her life depended upon it. Before Hermione turned and left, she gave him a cheeky wink, just as she had done weeks before, then she turned and left, looking morose and dejected, a slump to her shoulders, and the door slammed behind her, causing her to jump.

Perhaps one day, she would be able to visit him and truly offer him her friendship. Perhaps . . . one day.

Note: *That's the end of An Act of Love, but the sequel, [Death's Dominion](#), is up here at TPP. What changes has this ill-cast spell wrought, and how will they affect the future of Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, and Albus Dumbledore and the wizarding world?*