

As Soon As I Belong

by firefly124

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn.

The Victory Party

Chapter 1 of 11

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The Victory Party

She absolutely hated these things. As if it had not been bad enough to hold a massive celebration before the bodies of those they had lost were cold. Now, they had turned it into an annual event. Yes, of course it was a good thing Voldemort was gone. That was what they had been fighting for, after all, but did the phrase "Pyrrhic victory" mean nothing to the wizarding world? Perhaps they translated it as "let's party".

As one of the surviving heroes of said Pyrrhic victory, Hermione Granger was expected no, required to attend. Being an Unspeakable did not, unfortunately, result in being invisible to one's more politically minded superiors. However, requiring her to attend was all McCalman could do. He could not make her dance nor act in a sociable manner. Sitting at a small table on the sidelines and getting blessedly pissed was about the only thing that made these things remotely tolerable, and she had learned to do it well. That and hexing the occasional idiot who tried to hit on her. Creative hexing while drunk was almost sufficient distraction from her reason for being here.

Almost.

And here came another one. She did not even bother to look up. Instead, she pointed her wand at the approaching torso and legs, not caring if her hand wavered.

"You really want to leave me alone," she said.

"Miss Granger," replied a familiar voice, "you are far too intoxicated to possibly cast the simplest spell with any accuracy."

She looked up, then, and snorted as she lowered her wand. My, how the world had changed when *he* was no threat.

"True enough," she admitted. "But you should see some of the interesting results."

"Why are you not out there celebrating? Too good for the rest, now that you are a heroine?" he sneered.

She glared at him. Both of him. She would need to take that Sobering Draught soon.

"Why're you here at all?" she retorted. She could not remember ever having seen him at one of these events over the past five years. Then again, she did her best not to remember the events at all.

He sat down in the other chair at her table. She glared at him again. His arrogance shouldn't have surprised her, but it certainly annoyed her.

"Who asked you to sit here?"

"This is the most isolated location in the room, Miss Granger, as you have no doubt ascertained already," he said. "Sharing it with an inebriated former student, however annoying, is preferable to being in any more populated a location."

"And, maybe, if you're already sitting with a woman, other women'll stop harassing you?" she hazarded.

He turned a hand palm-up to acknowledge the point. She supposed that might work to her advantage as well.

"Very well, Mr. Snape," she said after an extended silence. "Are we to make some sort of conversation, then?"

"That would seem exceedingly foolish," he replied. "What would we talk about, Quidditch? I doubt you have any real interest in it. I know I do not. Your job? That is a conversation that would last approximately three seconds before you would have to kill or Oblivate anyone within earshot. The weather? We're in London. It's damp."

"What about *your* job?" she asked, pulling a phial from her pocket and unstopping it.

"What are you doing?"

"That's what I was about to ask you," she said peevishly.

"No, what are you putting into your drink, you silly girl?"

She narrowed her eyes at them. Him.

"Sobering Draught," she replied, thinking he must have had rather a lot to drink himself if he couldn't work that out.

"And you are putting it into a glass of Firewhisky." His tone was incredulous.

"Yes. I don't want to be sober, but it'd be much easier to talk to only one of you."

"Merlin," he muttered.

"I heard that." She took a large swallow of her drink and found herself decidedly less drunk, but still not approaching sober. Perfect. "So, then, Mr. Snape, I believe I asked you a question."

"No, you did not."

"Well, I was going to before you interrupted."

"Merlin."

"You said that already," she pointed out helpfully.

He passed his hand over his face and presumably reached the decision that it was still preferable to discuss his employment with a former student than to leave this relatively isolated corner.

"Very well, Miss Granger," he began, "I have begun teaching a course in the Auror Training Programme."

"You're teaching?"

"That is what I said, yes."

"Voluntarily?"

"No. Mr. Shackbolt has me under the Imperius Curse," he sneered. "Of course, *voluntarily*."

"I thought you hated teaching."

"I hated teaching dunderheads."

"We weren't all dunderheads."

"I hated teaching know-it-alls even more."

"And Auror Trainees?"

"Are required to pass stringent standards to gain entry to the programme, leaving no dunderheads, and thankfully, few know-it-alls. The latter, as I understand it, are more likely to apply to the Department of Mysteries."

It really was perverse of her to be so enthralled by his voice while he was clearly denigrating her. Then again, perhaps that was part of the allure. She made an absent comment about how thinking one knew everything was utterly incompatible with working in the Department of Mysteries, and the conversation was off, barely requiring her conscious participation and leaving her free to become lost in her own thoughts.

She had not realised until her seventh year how much she had enjoyed listening to him lecture. Of course, that was exactly the sort of thing one would not notice until it was no longer there. Then, as now, no doubt part of the enjoyment was that he did not put her on some pedestal. Other teachers might have given her praise and points, but they also made it clear that excellence was no less than they expected of her. Professor Snape had never given her any reward but for silent grades, treating her horribly but challenging her as none of the others had.

Tonight, she had chased away no less than five men who clearly wanted only the notoriety of having been with her, whether merely wishing to be seen with her or something more. That had been... interesting for the first few months after the war. It was one way to forget how much she had lost. Her parents. Harry. Ginny. So, for a while, she had let herself succumb to the charms of the fame-seeking until their vacuous eyes and shallow agendas left her feeling emptier than before. She sent them on their way, each faster than the last until she had decided it was not worth those few moments of connection to be bothered at all.

Here, however, was someone who had never, and would never, look at her as some sort of trophy. Here was someone who had as good as told her he was trying to avoid the exact same sort of attentions she was. Yes, he was a mean, nasty person, but perhaps it was more important that he held no illusions about her. Perhaps this was someone she could truly just lose herself with for a while, neither of them having any ridiculous expectations. She could do with a bit of human contact.

Clearly, she had not had enough Sobering Draught. Not only was she contemplating... what was she contemplating? A one-night stand? Some sort of no-strings-attached "arrangement"? Something else? No matter. Not only was she contemplating whatever it was she was contemplating, but she was doing so while looking directly at someone who was arguably the strongest Legilimens left standing in Britain; something she would never do while sober.

"No, Miss Granger," he was saying, "clearly you have not had enough Sobering Draught. Kindly take the rest of it, without mixing it in yet more alcohol, or this conversation is over."

She looked at him curiously, then pulled the phial back out, opened it, and tipped the rest into her mouth.

The Morning After

Chapter 2 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn.

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The Morning After

Snape awoke as he always did: suddenly. His eyes snapped open, and he took in the unfamiliar surroundings quickly. There was the barest moment of stabbing fear, replaced promptly with the memory of why he was waking up in an unfamiliar place and with whom. Glancing at the tangle of curls on the pillow beside him, he felt himself wince internally.

It was not that he was ashamed of what they had done precisely. There was absolutely no reason why two adults, who were sick of being alone and of being fawned over, should not take a night of comfort and pleasure with each other. She had been very clear that she was not looking for anything more and would hex him if he tried to make it into something more. She had also been absolutely brilliant, but he forced himself not to begin reminiscing before he had even left. The problem was that in Severus Snape's experience, even women who said things like that and meant them often discovered after the fact that they really did want something more, and something had flickered through her eyes suggesting that whatever she had said, she might not be any different. It was also his experience that the most effective way to nip such an idea in the bud was to be absent when the woman in question awoke.

A soft snore escaped her, and he found himself unaccountably reluctant to leave.

Dismissing the ridiculous notion, he slipped carefully out from under the duvet and Summoned his clothes. How, exactly, had his shirt landed *behind* her tallboy? He slipped into the bathroom to dress, narrowly avoiding what appeared to be a large, orange bottlebrush in his path, which was apparently attached to a cat that was looking at him intently. Perhaps he had taken the animal's usual sleeping spot. He smirked.

Once dressed, he made to leave her flat only to discover that she had an alarming number of enchantments, some of them quite Dark, protecting her doorway from exit as well as entry. Well, yes, she was an Unspeakable, but this was an absurd level of security! For that matter, if he used any of these on his own home, he would probably be out of a job and perhaps even arrested.

Irritating chit.

He drew his wand and began dismantling them. The large, ginger feline came out of the bedroom to observe him, making odd, soft vocalisations from time to time.

Several minutes later, Snape felt utterly exhausted, but at least the charms were all undone and in such a way that they would snap back into place upon his exit. He staggered through the door, waited a moment until he was certain her utterly paranoid precautions were in effect once again, and left. He had planned to Apparate home, but that little exercise had taken far more out of him than he had expected. Instead, once he reached the street, he held out his wand hand with a grimace to flag down the Knight Bus. It would be an uncomfortable ride, but preferable to Splinching himself.

~*~

Hermione awoke as she always did on a Sunday morning: languidly. She stretched, yawned, rubbed her eyes, and felt around for Crookshanks. Why wasn't he in his usual spot? Then, she remembered.

That had been utterly brilliant. Who would have thought? She let her eyes drift closed and remembered. Apparently, his hands were every bit as skilled with a woman's body as they were with potions ingredients or a wand. She had done rather well herself, she thought. And he hadn't hung around for some sort of awkward breakfast scene, which was exactly what she had hoped. No complications.

That was what she'd hoped, right?

Crookshanks jumped up onto the bed and uttered a soft *mew*.

"So, what have you been up to, then?" she asked, scratching that spot behind his left ear.

He sniffed the pillow next to her, purred for approximately two seconds, and then mewed again. He appeared surprisingly unperturbed that his pillow had been so rudely borrowed, which was rather unusual. With another *mew*, he butted his head against her chin.

"All right, all right. Breakfast is coming!" She pushed him away with a laugh and clambered out of bed. This was going to be a lovely and relaxing morning.

When she had put the kettle on for tea and served Crookshanks his usual breakfast, she padded over to open the window so that when the owl with the *Prophet* arrived, it could come right in. She was surprised to notice that in addition to her usual locking charms, several more layers of enchantments had been added. Some of them seemed to be outright Dark in origin. Was this Snape's idea of leaving a flower on the pillow, turning her flat into an impenetrable vault? Well, he probably was rather paranoid. Looked at in a certain light, it was almost sweet, which was a frightening thought. Besides, she could get into awful trouble at work if she were found to have such Dark enchantments on her flat, and they did have their ways of knowing these things.

Then again, he worked for the Ministry, too, and should know that. Perhaps that was his objective: to get her sacked? That would be more in character, but almost as annoying as the "sweet" interpretation.

Flicking her wand, she made short work of dismantling the charms and opened the window. Then, with a sigh she turned to address the door, which was no doubt even more severely protected, just as the kettle began to whistle.

Monday at the Ministry

Chapter 3 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn. Note: warning is not for HG or SS.

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Monday at the Ministry

The nice thing about teaching Auror Trainees was that you could just set them to hexing each other, observe, and tell them what they were doing wrong. That took substantially less energy than demonstrating things, and Snape was still feeling very low on energy despite having spent his Sunday as an uncharacteristic day of rest.

There were actually rather a lot of enjoyable things about teaching Auror Trainees. It was Defence Against the Dark Arts without adolescent angst and whining. It was also a respected job with a Ministry that had many years of disrespect for which to atone. A job he (mostly) enjoyed, an Order of Merlin, First Class, and even a decent shag this weekend. What more could a man ask for, really?

"Mr. Turner," he barked at the trainee who had just got his feet glued to the ceiling, "the idea behind a Rebounding Shield is to turn the hex back upon your opponent, not to reverse the effect of it upon yourself." The hex his partner had used was, after all, supposed to trap a person on the *ground* on which they stood.

As the instructor, he probably ought to see to getting the young man down safely. Fortunately, he had never had any problem with delegating.

"Mustow! Watson! Get him down - preferably without dropping him on his head not that he appears to be using it today," he ordered.

The two trainees wavered only a little before positioning themselves below Turner and coordinating their efforts to sort him out. As all it should require was a simple *Mobilicorpus* from one and a *Finite Incantatem* from the other, surely they could manage it? The only reason Turner couldn't sort himself out was that his wand had not followed the rest of him up to the ceiling. Meanwhile, Snape turned his attention to the rest, who were watching with interest.

"Do you think this is a show?" he demanded. "Get back to your..."

A loud thud announced the utter failure of Mustow and Watson to remove Turner from the ceiling without dropping him. Had it been only two days ago that he'd said the Auror Trainee Programme did not admit dunderheads? Furious, Snape stalked over to assess the situation.

Turner's left shoulder appeared out of joint and his nose was bleeding, but at least the fool was conscious. Feeling energised by his anger, Snape whipped out his wand and cast a stabilising spell on the shoulder so the idiot could be transported to the infirmary. No sooner had the spell left his wand than he felt what had to be the last dregs of his illusory energy drain out of him. He barely had time to register the indignity of it before the room went dark.

~*~

He awoke in the infirmary with a groan. Through bleary eyes, he spotted a Healer and two mediwizards the apparent sources of the grating voices echoing through his skull.

"... magic levels are near zero. It's obviously a curse of some kind, but it's nothing we've seen before."

"Can we reverse it?"

"Not until we figure out what 'it' is. And we're not sure what will happen if it actually drains all his magic."

Though his head was still swimming, Severus thought he knew. He thought he knew all too well. That bloody curse was supposed to have been embedded in the Dark Mark, which was gone, so he had not given it a second thought. Once his magic was gone, it would begin to drain his life force. Slowly, of course, as it was supposed to allow for maximum torture once the betrayal was discovered.

He closed his eyes again. It was his own damned fault. He should have at least considered the possibility before allowing himself to be seduced by Miss Granger's lascivious thoughts. More than that, it was his own fault the Dark Lord had ever added this curse to the various controls he maintained over his followers in the first place. While he was hardly a stranger to regret, this time there was a tinge of irony that made it just that bit worse. He groaned again and wondered if he could will himself back unconscious.

~*~

"You can't be serious!" Hermione fumed. "Curse-breaking is not my area of expertise at all. That's Croaker, and you know it!"

"He's already given it his best shot," McCalman replied. "Besides, there's reason to believe you might have greater success with this."

She looked darkly at the cursed Time-Turner.

"I used one for a year," she retorted. "Oh, and helped smash a whole bunch of them, too. Thought we'd destroyed the lot actually. That doesn't make me an expert."

There were a lot of things she loved about her job. McCalman was not one of them. When he left her alone to get things done, everything went much more smoothly. This was her niche; and yet he kept trying to break her out of it for some unfathomable reason.

Her boss raised his eyebrows at her. She handed the Time-Turner and its protective container back. At least, she tried to, but he put his hands behind his back and began backing toward the doorway. Just before he reached it, a paper aeroplane flew in over his shoulder and headed straight for Hermione. She set the container down on a nearby table and caught the note.

Opening the note, she glanced suspiciously at her boss. She read it, furrowed her brow, and read it again.

"Why are they asking for me?" she wondered aloud. "I'm not only not a curse-breaker, I'm also not a Healer."

"What?" McCalman asked.

"Did you know about this?" She handed him the creased parchment and watched as he read it.

"No," he replied. "Nobody ran this by me."

Now she was more confused than ever.

"Well, I don't have the skills they'd need, and they would have to go through you to request my help anyway..."

She pushed past him and through the door, mentally running through a list of all the people she knew who could possibly have got themselves cursed, landed themselves in the Ministry infirmary, and then requested her presence. Even now, it was a fairly long list, and she had not finished it by the time she arrived. Even if she had finished it, she probably would not have included the man she saw when they ushered her into the curtained-off area.

The sight that greeted her made her jaw drop.

It was Snape, and he looked like death. On Saturday, she had discovered that he had more muscle on his lithe frame than she would ever have thought. Now, he appeared positively gaunt. His complexion had seemed much improved since her student days, but now, "sallow" would be several shades healthier than his skin appeared. How could he have changed so much in two days? What had he been hit with? Why had he asked for her?

Black eyes opened slightly, then closed tightly as he grimaced and turned away.

"I thought I told you not to bring her into it," Snape said, his voice gravelly with dehydration.

"You also said that it has something to do with her," one of the Healers replied.

"Doesn't matter," he answered. "She can't undo it. The only one who could is dead."

"Undo what?" Hermione asked, finally finding her voice.

His head turned slowly back to face her, and he slitted his eyes open again.

"Nothing," he said. "They should not have involved you."

"You said *undo*," she persisted. "That implies something was *done* in the first place. What happened to you?"

"It's of no consequence," he muttered. "Please leave."

She stared at him in confusion. She still had no idea what to make of his exit yesterday morning, or rather, the parting "gift" he had left. And now this?

"Was there something about those protective charms?" she asked, deliberately keeping her question vague. She had no desire for their indiscretion to become fodder for gossip. "Did something rebound onto you because of the way I removed them? Why did you put them there, anyway?"

"I did not put them there, Miss Granger," he rasped. "I thought you had. Didn't recognise... Should have known really." He began coughing convulsively.

"What's happened to him?" she asked the Healer who was not currently trying to stop the coughing fit. "And what has it got to do with me?"

"It seems Mr. Snape has been affected by a residual curse cast by... You Know Who," the woman said hesitantly. "He will not tell us what it involves precisely, though he did ask whether you had arrived at work safely this morning. As this suggests you might have been affected by the same curse somehow, we asked for you to be brought here."

"I see," she said, completely bypassing the fact that she did not see at all.

"Am I correct in surmising you were both trying to break some sort of Dark enchantment?"

"What?" she asked. "Oh. Um. Sort of. Not at the same time, though. I... can I speak to him alone, please?"

"Miss Granger, surely you realise all the Healers here have the highest possible Ministry clearances," the woman protested.

Hermione fixed the Healer with the stare she used to use on Harry and Ron to get them to do their homework and currently used to reprimand her subordinates when they did something particularly foolish. It worked.

"Fine." The Healer looked over to see that Snape had ceased coughing and appeared relatively stable once again. She raised her voice. "Ten minutes, everyone."

A few odd looks were shot at both Hermione and Snape, but the room cleared quickly. She approached his bed.

"Now," she said, "do you mind telling me what is going on?"

"Yes, I mind," he replied. "I am dying. Please honour a dying man's last wish and leave me alone."

~*~

He knew it could not be that simple. When had the chit ever given up on something simply because she should?

"I'll do nothing of the kind," Hermione retorted. "Considering this clearly involves me in some way, I believe I'm owed an explanation. You might start with who put those Dark charms on my flat."

"The Dark Lord obviously."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course. He's been dead for five years, Severus, so how exactly did he manage that?"

"It is part of a curse he placed on all of us after his return," he said. "If you are going to force me to speak, you could at least provide me with water."

He watched as she looked about for some and then, with a shrug, Conjured a glass and filled it from her wand. Propping himself up on one elbow, he accepted the glass and took a careful sip. Relishing the soothing feel of it on his throat, he set the glass down gently and sank back onto the bed.

"The Dark Lord decided that he needed some guarantee that his followers would not form inappropriate liaisons with Muggles or Muggle-borns," he said. "He added an additional curse to our Dark Marks that would take effect if any of us had carnal relations with a person fitting either description."

Her stunned silence was so profound, it nearly had a sound of its own.

"Before you ask, obviously I thought the curse had been banished with the Dark Mark itself. Clearly, it had not."

He looked over to her again and saw that she was chewing on her lower lip a habit she had clearly not left behind when she left school. For a moment, he let himself enjoy the sight. There would be precious little for him to enjoy for the rest of his short life after all. Then, he shook his head and continued.

"The curse has three stages; first, it contains the offending Death Eater, and his or her partner, and sends an alert to the Dark Lord to locate them."

"I thought," she said, then stopped. "That is, I couldn't imagine why you would... At least that makes some sort of sense."

He did not dignify her babbling with an acknowledgement.

"Second, any magic that Death Eater casts progressively drains his or her magic until it is completely depleted. Finally, once that has run its course, it drains the life energy of the cursed person, though much more slowly." He grimaced. "To allow for lengthy torture, of course."

"Of course," she agreed faintly.

Another weighty silence fell. Finally, he broke it.

"Now you know, and now you may leave," he said, looking away from her once again.

"Severus, that's... Of course I won't just leave," she retorted. "We have to find a way to fix this."

"There is no way to fix this, Miss Granger," he replied. "Only the Dark Lord would be able to lift the spell. No doubt they will have more than one curse-breaker give it a go, but unless I am very much mistaken, your area of expertise, whatever it may be, is not curse-breaking."

She sighed.

"You're right. It isn't."

He did not look back at her, but the rustle of her robes told him that if he did turn to look at her again, she would have her arms crossed and a stern expression on her face, assuming that habit had remained as well. Rather than turning to see, he focused on the table full of odd implements against the far wall.

"Research, however, most certainly is my area of expertise," she continued.

"Merlin," he muttered. "You are not going to find the answer to this in some book, Miss Granger."

"All things considered, Severus, you might try calling me, 'Hermione'," she replied. "And I may not find the answer in a book, but I may find something that suggests where an answer might be."

Now he did turn to face her. She did, in fact, have her arms crossed and the precise expression he had imagined. At least it was not pity, though he had no doubt there was some of that, too. He wished he had the energy to yell at her.

"Very well, Hermione," he rasped. "All you will find is that the curse can only be removed by the one who cast it. Since he is well and truly dead, that will not happen. I am not one of your little projects, and I have not asked for your help. Our agreement was that we would return to our normal lives, and I demand that you uphold your end of that agreement and drop this foolishness."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Well, that would be the problem, wouldn't it?" she retorted. "You're not keeping your end of the agreement, either."

With that, she turned and stormed out of the infirmary.

~*~

She should have known it wouldn't be that simple. They wanted an explanation from her, and when she refused to break Snape's confidence, they ran every test known to wizardkind on her, trying to determine whether the curse was affecting her as well. Nearly two hours later, she was finally allowed to return to the Department of Mysteries.

It was a matter of minutes before she had sorted out her department's current projects, freeing her own schedule to focus on Snape's problem for the foreseeable future. By and large, her subordinates did do well. She hoped they would continue to do so while she approached Croaker about borrowing a bit of his library. The nice thing about her fellow Unspeakables was that they were very good about sharing resources without asking questions.

McCalman might have something to say about this diversion of resources, but really, he had been trying to foist a cursed Time-Turner on her. Had managed it, actually, as two of her subordinates were now examining the thing. Perhaps they would bring Croaker in on this, anyway, but there was no arguing that a Ministry employee and war hero dying a slow death took priority.

Anyway, they had involved her as soon as they summoned her to the infirmary. Not that the aeroplane had come from anyone she could remotely refer to as her superior by any convoluted chain of command, but she was involved nonetheless. That settled, she took herself off to Croaker's office.

Seeking Answers Elsewhere

Chapter 4 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn. Note: warning not for main pairing characters

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Seeking Answers Elsewhere

"There's just nothing here," she complained later that evening. She swirled her glass of Firewhisky and took another gulp.

"Hermione, I know you think I'm pants at sympathy anyway, but what can you expect when you won't even tell me what I'm supposed to be sympathetic about?" Ron asked.

"Oh, honestly," she snapped. "What is it about the word, 'Unspeakable' that confuses you?"

He held up his hands.

"Fine, fine. Only you've said that bit about not finding anything about fifty times. Kind of sounds like you want help looking."

She glared into her glass. She did want help. Not that he'd ever willingly give it, even if she were willing to explain. Besides, he could probably tell she wasn't being entirely honest and that it wasn't actually about her job at all. Still, even if she were willing to violate Severus' privacy, there was no way she could tell him about *that!* They might have broken up even before the war ended, but he still didn't deal well with any of the men she had dated since, and this would definitely drive him around the twist.

"Let's say," she began in a tentative voice, "that someone you knew had been hit with some horrible curse. A delayed-reaction kind of thing, so the one who cast it is long dead and can't remove it. Not that he would."

"Okay."

"You'd think that there would have to be some other way to reverse it, but nothing anywhere covers curses embedded within each other, never mind with that sort of trigger."

"Mione, you've only had an afternoon to work on this. How can you be sure there's nothing anywhere?"

"Well, nothing I've been able to...." She looked at him suspiciously. "What makes you think I've just started researching this today?"

"Well, you're talking about Snape, aren't you?" he asked softly after a quick glance about to make sure no one was close enough to overhear.

"What makes you think that?" she hissed back.

"A collapse like that? It's the talk of the Auror Division," he replied. "Not exactly a Department of Mysteries matter, either."

She groaned. There were few things more certain to infuriate Snape at this point than to be the subject of gossip and speculation, and wouldn't *that* just make things even more interesting?

"So why're you working on this?"

"Well," she stalled, "I'm not exactly. But no one else seems to be getting anywhere."

Ron rolled his eyes at her.

"Aren't you the one who accused Harry of having a, 'saving people thing'?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"And aren't there other people around better at curse-breaking?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"And didn't he used to make you cry?"

"That was just the once..."

"So why are you doing this?"

Because she felt responsible? Because the Healers obviously had no idea what they were dealing with, and wouldn't since Snape would never tell them exactly what was killing him and why? Because without his help, Harry's sacrifice would have been in vain?

Ron might go for that last one.

He did.

"I still can't tell you exactly what it is, Ron," she began.

"But it's obviously something Vo-oldemort did," he interrupted, only stammering a little. "So, if you're not finding anything in the scary Ministry Dark Arts Archives, why aren't you asking another ex-Death Eater?"

She stared at him nonplussed.

"Well, you have to use whatever resources you have," he pointed out. "I mean, this is important to you, right?"

"Yes," she replied softly, her stomach giving a light flip that might have been guilt or possibly too much Firewhisky on an empty stomach.

"And, you've been keeping in touch with him, haven't you?"

"Well, yes..."

"And, he's got to have some resources at his disposal. You were both always much too fond of the library."

"That's true," she admitted. With a deep breath she squared her shoulders and decided. "I'll owl Viktor tonight."

~*~

When they woke him the following morning for the next round of useless potions and pointless counter-curses, he was unsurprised to find Hermione Granger present. What was astonishing was that she said nothing until the Healers finished up and left him in relative peace.

"What the devil are you doing here, Mi ... Hermione? Is everyone completely incapable of comprehending my desire to return home to die?"

"I'm here to get you out," she replied, "but not to take you home."

"And what fresh torture have you devised in the name of Gryffindor foolishness?" he sneered, his voice much improved since yesterday.

"If you're going to play the House card, then I'll remind you that Slytherins are supposed to prioritise saving their own necks," she retorted.

"We are not, however, known for championing hopeless causes."

"At least something they gave you must be helping. You weren't remotely yourself yesterday. Elixir of Sarcasm, perhaps?"

"No, something they gave me must be prolonging the inevitable." At least it had got rid of that hideous cough.

She rolled her eyes, then fixed him with a firm stare. Clearly, whatever she had in mind, she was completely set on it.

"We're going to Bulgaria."

"And why should I want to do such an imbecilic thing, even assuming I could survive the trip?"

"Viktor believes his library contains some volumes that may be useful."

Viktor? Oh. Krum. Igor's student. That was... possible. He tamped down the spark of hope her words had ignited.

"Then why does he not simply loan them to you by owl?" he sneered.

"Because they're illegal to possess in Britain, and I'd like to still have my job and live somewhere other than Azkaban when this is done. Also, some are quite old and probably have worse odds than you of surviving the trip."

"And why are you dragging me with you?"

She looked at him as though he had suggested he might enjoy a foxglove salad for lunch. That would actually speed things along, come to think of it.

"Severus, how much time do you estimate you have?"

"Three days," he replied. "Four at the most. The curse was supposed to allow for a week of torture before death."

She paled slightly, but pressed on. "That's why you need to come. As soon as we identify what needs to be done, we shall have to do it immediately."

There was little point in arguing with her, it seemed. Her determination was, in fact, dangerously infectious. He gritted his teeth and reminded himself repeatedly that this venture was most likely futile as she explained the Portkey arrangements she had made.

Beginning the Research

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn. Note: warning is not for main pairing characters.

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Beginning the Research

"Vell, Herm-own-ninny, I did not think it would require such circumstances for you to visit," Viktor said.

"You've never asked," Hermione pointed out with a smile. "Well, not recently."

Severus scowled up at them both. He did not like idle pleasantries, Portchairs, or, for that matter, former Quidditch stars and Triwizard Tournament champions who had no business turning up again. He especially did not like former Quidditch stars whose fame alone, apparently, had spared them any consequences for having followed the Dark Lord. As he had barely enough strength to remain upright in the chair, however, he contented himself with scowling.

"Professor Snape," the upstart said.

"Mr. Snape," he snapped. "Haven't been a professor in years."

"But I thought Herm-own-ninny said you vere teaching ven the curse hit you?"

Apparently, Miss Granger had managed to avoid explaining precisely which curse was involved. Well, there had been several embedded in the Mark.

The boy would want to know which it had been, so as to avoid triggering it himself. The boy, he noticed, was flirting with Miss Granger. Perhaps he should know which curse it had been. Or, perhaps he should not. It mattered little. Granger knew and, whatever her faults, she would not inflict this upon someone knowingly.

Pity.

"I would offer to show you to your rooms, but I am sure you would prefer to go directly to the library," their host continued, clearly having given up on receiving a reply to his question.

Hermione nodded vigorously, and Severus suffered himself to be levitated, chair and all, down the long, ornate hallway that led to the library, paying little attention to the rather impressive artwork they passed along the way.

~*~

Once they were settled in the library, Hermione fell into the familiar rhythm of research. She selected one of the texts Viktor had recommended and disarmed, and began reading, periodically glancing at Severus as he pored over another tome. Once, she caught a glimpse of him smoothing a page almost reverently, and a shudder ran through her.

Lucky book.

She banished the thought as inappropriate. The man was dying, had gone from lean to gaunt to skeletal in mere days, and having sex with him was what had got him this way in the first place. Dragging her attention back to her own book, she forced herself to focus on the words before her.

"Historically, magical brands have been used primarily in military contexts ..."

Several hours later, she had a sheaf of notes but felt she had really only managed to scratch the surface. Certainly, she had a better understanding of the charms and hexes used for the basic Mark, but she had found nothing relating to how one might add additional curses, never mind how such curses might outlast the brand itself. The one thing that was very clear was that brands such as these should, in fact, disappear without a trace upon the death of the one to whom they were linked.

Severus, she saw, was almost falling asleep in his book. Her immediate instinct was to ask Viktor to have him put to bed. She stifled it, knowing it would only infuriate him. Besides, if it were her, she would insist on being part of the research, no matter what.

She selected another volume and began to read.

~*~

Severus had been both annoyed and relieved when Krum had insisted they break for dinner. As they were insistent upon chasing this false hope, they might as well be thorough about it. However, it was true that the mind needed fuel. More to the point, if he were going to survive long enough to utilise any counter-curse they might find, he needed to keep up his flagging strength.

Being floated down the hallway of Krum's home to the dining room was humiliating, but more bearable for the fact there was no one else about. And Severus could not argue that the food was anything other than fortifying. Small surprise when one looked at Krum, who had filled out considerably since his visit to Hogwarts all those years ago. The lentil stew was particularly good, he thought, but he had never acquired a taste for moussaka. He chose to take his potions during that course. At least that way, their flavour would not spoil something he actually liked.

After dinner, he had hoped to return to the library, but his traitorous body required him to accept the most embarrassing assistance from the house-elves, after which sleep beckoned him like a siren.

How appropriate, he thought, to think of being lured to bed and seduced into oblivion.

Soon after, thought fled, and he sank into a restless sleep featuring dreams in which he watched Hermione continue to pore over musty old grimoires, periodically tucking her unruly hair back behind her ears and chewing on her lip.

~*~

The evening's research was no more productive, though at least Hermione felt herself to be less distracted with Severus absent. She had waded nearly halfway through a third book when Viktor spoke up.

"Vy are you doing this, Herm-own-ninny?" he asked.

"He deserves to be helped," she replied with a shrug.

"No, vy are *you* doing this?" he asked. "This is not your specialty."

"No," she admitted. "Curse-breaking is not my specialty."

She noticed she'd been saying that a lot lately.

"Then vy?"

She sighed. "He is a friend. He was my teacher."

"A friend only?"

She looked at him sharply, suddenly very uncomfortable.

"Why would you ask that?"

"I haff seen how you look at him."

"You're mistaking concern for something else."

"Perhaps."

An uneasy silence fell.

"There is vun curse vich vas not in the Dark Mark," Viktor said, "but vas added later."

She stiffened. She didn't want him to know what specific curse had been activated and did not want to examine the reason for that too closely. But if he knew something...

"This could be that curse," she said carefully.

"It vas never fully part of the Mark," he said. "Many of us took care to remove it after the Mark had gone. Perhaps vun who had received it earlier vould not realise it only used the Mark. It vas not attached to it."

She looked at him intently.

"It is not hard to remove, if you haff done it before it is activated."

"And after?"

"I do not know, but these are the wrong books to seek that answer."

She sighed and closed the book before her, which was beginning to growl again.

"Then where are the right books?"

She saw a flash of some emotion cross his face before he drew his wand to Summon a different selection of texts. These were even more fiercely protective of their contents than the previous set, and it took him the better part of half an hour to disarm one of them so that she could read it safely. That odd look crossed his features again as he handed it to her.

She smiled uncertainly and nodded before she began to read:*Sex Magic and the Wandering Spouse*.

How Far to Go for a Cure?

Chapter 6 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn. Note: warning is not for main pairing characters.

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How Far to Go for a Cure?

When he awoke, Severus did not have to remind himself not to reach for his wand and cast *Lumos* to brighten the unfamiliar room. He did not have enough physical energy to sit up unaided, much less magical energy to do anything of the kind. He croaked out the name of the house-elf that had put him to bed last night, and it appeared with a crack.

The elves here did not speak English at all but understood the needs of the humans they served well enough for the most part. The room was quickly lit by candles in wall sconces, and the elf assisted him from the bed to his floating chair, to and from the loo, and finally to the dining room.

After breakfast, the house-elf guided him to the library where a space had clearly been left for his floating chair, a book already disarmed and waiting for him. Severus looked at it with suspicion.

Making Your Straying Spouse's Lover Their Own Punishment

"What is this?" he demanded with a snarl.

"It may be some of the source material Voldemort used for this curse," Hermione replied.

He scowled at her and Krum.

"Severus, did you know that this curse was not originally part of the Dark Mark?" she asked.

"Yes," he grumbled. He had told her as much, hadn't he?

"Did you know it was still cast separately even once Voldemort had started using it on new recruits?"

He looked at Krum, startled.

"No."

"He vould not haff told you," Krum said. "But many of us knew."

Severus' eyes narrowed. Did the man know why Voldemort would have kept this from him? Did he know why the Dark Lord would have kept this information *specifically* from him?

"Ve only know how to remooof it before it is activated," the Bulgarian continued, "but there must be a vay."

Severus was instantly seized with a desire to insist that they leave.

"This is pointless," he snapped. "The Dark Lord did not fashion his curses on love spells for disgruntled house-witches."

"Actually," Hermione said, "two of the books we looked at last night held promising information. One covered an imprisoning enchantment to keep the unfaithful partner at the scene of the crime. The jinxes were very similar to the ones on my flat. Another contained a curse to drain the witch or wizard's power, but it went to the wronged party. That would have been Voldemort. So, where did yours go?"

"The Mark would have been necessary to relay the power to him," he pointed out.

"Probably," she agreed. "So where did the power and your life energy go? If we can figure that out, maybe we can get it back."

"None of this coffers the physical drain," Krum pointed out, "but Herm-own-ninny's theory is sound."

Severus looked at Hermione with loathing. It had been her blasted lust that had started this. Of course, she was one of Potter's cronies. That just made the whole damned circle complete, didn't it? And now she was plying him with false hope, and toward what end?

"We'll figure it out, Severus," she said in a placating tone obviously meant to lower his defences.

"What you will figure out, you infernal succubus, is how to complete your plan to steal my power for your own! And once you have succeeded, you will probably throw it away, too, in some grandiose act of Gryffindor so-called bravery! Elf!"

The house-elf that had attended him earlier returned and guided his chair out of the library and back to his room.

How dare she? Carrying out some last wish of Potter's, no doubt, to see me disgraced and destroyed.

That Potter had had no opportunity to make, much less communicate, any such wish in the middle of the Final Battle was entirely beside the point. That was the sort of thing the Gryffindor Golden Trio had probably plotted about, giggling at the thought of his humiliation, even as they had accepted his help bringing the Dark Lord down.

He continued to seethe over the girl's treachery long after the elf had re-installed him in his bed, and the anger and resentment even permeated his dreams.

~*~

"So, paranoia directed at the lover with whom the person has been unfaithful?" Hermione asked with forced briskness.

"So it would seem," Viktor replied. "I haff not seen this in vat I haff read so far."

"Neither have I," she said with a sigh. There was a faint twinge in her chest as the echo of Severus' face distorted with suspicion flashed in her mind. She felt horrible enough to have been the cause of this, albeit indirectly and inadvertently. His words had cut her.

"He deserves better than this," she murmured.

"The vizarding vorld owes him many life-debts," Viktor agreed. "Effen if that vere not true, he vould deserve better because you haff decided it is so."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "What are you getting at?"

"It is obvious ven you look at him," Viktor said. "And any vizard who can vin your heart deserves the chance to prove he is vorthy of you or else to fail trying."

"What are you...? Viktor, it's nothing like that," she protested. "It was just... It was supposed to be uncomplicated."

"It is neffer uncomplicated."

"So I'm learning," she grumbled. "It's still nothing like that."

Viktor raised an eyebrow at her in an eerie imitation of Severus.

"Stop that!" she insisted. "It's not! Even if I did have feelings for Severus, and I don't, obviously he can barely stand the sight of me."

"Did it seem that vay ven...?" He let his voice trail off.

She felt herself flush.

"Well, no," she admitted. Fragments of memory almost made her smile: the way he had looked at her once he had removed her robes, the sensuous touch of his hands teasing her breasts until she swore she'd come from that alone, the unguarded expression he'd had as he came undone inside her. No, none of that fitted with someone who actually hated her. None of it meant there was anything more than great sex involved either, though. She gave herself an internal shake and refocused on the present. A different, more immediate memory intruded.

"He called me a succubus," she said thoughtfully.

"That vas the curse talking."

"Maybe, but that's not the point. If his powers and life energy were supposed to go to Voldemort and couldn't... what if they went to me?"

Viktor frowned as he considered this.

"Think about it. I slept barely three hours last night, and I'm still wide awake and ready to go."

"You vere always excited by your research."

"Yes, but I still get tired. I haven't really done much magic, but... what sort of spell would work best to test...? I know!" She drew her wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

The silver otter that erupted from her wand was so brilliant it nearly blinded them both. Several of the Darker books screamed in protest.

"Finite Incantatem!"

She blinked for a minute or two until the colourful spots disappeared from her vision, and she could see the library again. Once they did, she looked at Viktor and asked, "So, what do you have on incubi and succubi?"

~*~

"Severus," he heard someone say. "Severus, wake up."

He opened his eyes to find himself looking at the evil bitch responsible for his present condition.

"What the fuck do you want from me now?" he demanded. "You have already stolen my magic and my life. What more could you possibly want from me?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he was unable to suppress a shudder a response he had never shown even before the Dark Lord.

"Now you listen to me, Severus Snape," she said, "and you listen as if your life depended on it because it does."

"My life is already forfeit," he snarled. "Your façade of helpfulness is painfully transparent."

"This isn't you, Severus," she insisted. "This is an effect of the curse. It's making you paranoid. It's supposed to make you hate the person you betrayed Voldemort with."

"Do not speak the Dark Lord's name!" he shouted. For a moment, he could not understand why he had not felt the searing pain that normally accompanied the sound of it. Then he remembered that the Mark was gone.

"Your Dark Lord is the one who did this to you," she said firmly. "And if you've already decided you're doomed, what's left for me to do to you?"

"That's what you've been researching with your lover, isn't it?" he countered. "You tried to distract me with irrelevant lines of inquiry, but your mistake was to admit there was sex magic involved."

Now the look in her eyes was damnable pity.

"He built this in, Severus," she said. "It's all part of the curse partly to punish the person you'd got involved with and partly to make sure you never managed to break it."

That brought him up short.

"What? I told you that only the Dark Lord could remove the curse!"

"Yes, you did." Her features brightened. "So, you remember that he's the one who cursed you. Not me."

"I..." He considered her words. He did remember coming to that conclusion, but that was before she had slipped and revealed the nature of her plan.

It wasn't a very good plan, though, was it? Not the sort of thing he'd have expected from her at all.

"Are you with me, Severus?"

"I suppose I am," he replied cautiously. "For now."

"Did you ever see this curse triggered on any of the other Death Eaters?"

"No," he replied. "I heard of one instance, but I never saw the man."

"Was he allowed to live?"

"No."

She chewed her lip in a painfully familiar manner, suddenly looking very much more like the earnest student he remembered. This, too, seemed inconsistent with the plot she had sprung on him this morning when she... but why would she do that? She might have changed in many ways, even to the point of being willing to kill a man for an increase in her magical powers, but surely she could not have become stupid enough to hand that man such a clue to what she was doing. No one would do that unless they wanted to gloat.

She was not gloating.

"Why do you care? What are you planning now?"

"I'm planning to help you," she said. "That's the only plan there's ever been. Are you... Are you going to be able to trust me?"

"What difference could that possibly make?" he snarled. "If you are correct, and I am wrong about your role in this, then once you cure me, I will know the truth. If you are lying, then you have already killed me and have no need of my trust."

"It matters," she said hotly, "because I can't help you by myself. You have to be... willing. We could try a potion or something, maybe, but I'm not sure that would work. Even if it did, I'm not sure I could go through with it that way."

"What the devil are you on about?"

"Severus, the only way to break this curse is the same way we triggered it."

He stared at her, uncomprehending for a long minute. Then he felt all the pieces slip into place. It was all so very, very clear. How diabolical.

"Get out!" he shouted. "If you think I would bed you again, even to save my life, you are more insane than Bellatrix! I said, get out!"

As the door closed behind her, he was surprised by a stabbing pain in his chest. Perhaps the curse was finally moving into its last stages, and he would soon be free of this torture. That the pain might not be physical never entered his mind.

The Failure of Logic

Chapter 7 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding

world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn. Note: warning is not for main pairing characters.

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The Failure of Logic

She gave him a few more hours to rest and possibly think, though she wasn't sure how much thinking he was actually going to be able to do. How could a person think logically with a spell telling him that the very person trying to help was actually plotting against him? It was truly an insidious curse. No wonder Voldemort had latched onto it.

I wonder what made him decide to add it to the Dark Mark? Severus said it was after he came back.

Her eyes opened wide as the realisation hit her. It never had made sense to her that Voldemort had offered Harry's mum the chance to stand aside rather than be killed. What if

Of course, even if her guess was correct, that knowledge didn't help with the current problem. It was very interesting, possibly a little disturbing, but largely irrelevant.

The solution was simple enough. That was, of course, why so many additional effects had been added. It was bloody unlikely that someone would willingly have sex (again) with a person they believed actually had it in for them. As she'd told him, there were potions that might get around the physical problems that posed, but she did not think she could bring herself to do that. At least there were still a couple of days before she would have to consider something that desperate. Besides, it might not even work. Intent counted for a lot in magic.

Words did, too.

That was something else that was bothering her. At least one of the books, and the one that seemed to hold the most relevant information, stated that an "act of love" was required. Not simply "sex". It could be merely an euphemism, but that seemed unlikely given some of the other things it came straight out and said.

Viktor could be right that she had some sort of feelings for Severus. Feelings that went beyond gratitude, respect, and friendship. But she certainly didn't love him. She'd know it if she did, wouldn't she?

Perhaps a sort of general "love for one's fellow man" would suffice.

Perhaps she was reading too much into it.

And perhaps Viktor's elves would take more kindly to being offered badly knitted hats than Hogwarts' elves had, but she wouldn't place money on it.

The shape of the spell was evident, the more she thought about it. It required actual love between the wayward "spouse" and the person with whom they had strayed.

Even if Viktor was closer to the truth than she gave him credit for, that still left the problem of how Severus felt toward her.

Severus was doomed.

~*~

"Mr. Snape," a low voice said.

Severus opened his eyes with some effort. It was that little bitch's lover.

"What do you want, Krum?"

"Vy vill you not allow Herm-own-ninny to help you?" the man asked.

Severus snorted.

"You can drop the act, too, Krum. I may be too weak to do anything about it, but I have deduced your plot. I refuse to be party to it."

"Did she explain vat would be required?"

"She said enough." The tone in which he delivered this would have brooked no further discussion, had he been upright and somewhat less skeletal, he thought.

"Then you do not luff her?"

He scowled.

"What nonsense is this? Of course I do not 'luff' her."

"Then the vay you vere looking at me ven you thought I vas flirting vit her vas merely an effect of the curse?"

"If I did any such thing, it could only have been the result of a curse."

"The Dark Lord, he did not always look into things as carefully as he should. He did not believe in luff. He did not believe anyvun could break his curse because he did not believe the counter-curse could be real."

"He did not believe anyone could break his curse because he was an extremely powerful wizard. The only other wizard who might have done so... is no more."

A sharp pain tore through Severus at that thought. For that crime alone, he should have died long ago. Perhaps that was the real reason for Granger's little assassination plot.

"And vat would that vizard haff said about what I haff just told you."

"He said it often enough," Severus scoffed. "'Love is the power the Dark Lord knows not.' Even if that were true, and even if you were right, I do not have such emotions toward Miss Granger."

"Do you think you could?"

How was he supposed to answer that? Nearly anything was possible. Was such a thing probable? How could he know, based upon one night of lust?

His thoughts drifted back to the sight of her as she slept, curls spilled over her pillow and soft snores escaping her. He had watched her for a brief moment and had felt... something.

What I felt was a desire to make myself scarce before she woke up!

It had been pleasant to watch her, though.

"Even if you could not.... Even if you believe you will only die faster, perhaps, would it be so horrible to haff a beautiful voman make luff to you first?"

He snorted and turned away from Krum. As if he were in any shape to enjoy such a thing. It would probably horrify the chit if his heart simply gave out in the middle... which might be worth it for that alone. He could almost picture the look of disgust on her face. His stomach churned.

"That is not what they call it when one has sex as the only way to avoid death," he snarled at the wall.

Behind him, the door opened and closed, and he was alone once again. They would not do it. They would not convince him to participate in his own destruction. He had been foolish enough to succumb to her wiles in the first place, but he would not simply hand her the rest of his life force on a gilt platter.

And if some corner of his soul thought that was not the real reason he rejected the notion of being intimate with her again in such circumstances, it was surely just another effect of this curse, trying to persuade him that the damned harpy was truly trying to help.

A Gleam of Hope

Chapter 8 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn.

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A Gleam of Hope

"I've found it!"

Hermione felt like dancing a jig in triumph. It was surprisingly simple. With this, they could offset the paranoia, and then they could fix him.

"Vat is it?"

She pointed to the passage she had just read. Viktor nodded slowly.

"Yes, that might vork," he agreed. "Vill ve be able to convince him to take it?"

"I think so, yes. The paranoia is focused on me. It's extended to you by association, but not to the house-elves, and they bring his food."

"You vill dose his food without his knowledge?"

She put her hands on her hips. "Yes, I bloody well will. It's not like sneaking a lust potion in. This will clear his mind, not cloud it."

"And you do not think this vill cause more distrust?"

"Honestly, Viktor, once the paranoia has been cleared, he'll see why it had to be done this way. Then he can make a real decision about whether to try the counter-curse."

It still bothered her, though, to think of him having sex with her under threat of death. It was not as though she had set the terms of this blasted curse, but Severus was right; it smacked of rape. At least if he were able to make a rational decision, she might be able to live with herself afterwards. If there had ever been a chance of something growing between them, however, it would surely be destroyed.

She straightened her spine and squared her shoulders.

If he gets to live, it's worth it. Just please, let this potion work.

She Summoned a fresh sheet of parchment and copied out the directions for the potion.

"I vill haff to obtain several of these ingredients," Viktor said. "I vill be back shortly."

She nodded, not caring whether he saw her, and continued to write.

~*~

Krum's house-elves were very observant, it seemed. This one, at any rate, had clearly determined that the lentil stew was his favourite dish and had brought it yet again.

It was strange the way he felt when not actually thinking about his situation. He could enjoy good food. He could even find a sort of wry humour in the elf's attempts to communicate with him. It was still humiliating to require assistance getting into and out of his Portchair, going to the loo, and getting dressed and washed, but it didn't infuriate him.

And then he would think about Miss Granger and her paramour, and his blood would boil.

He willed himself not to think about them just now. Food was one of the few things left for him to enjoy for his last few days, and he was going to savour every bite. There was nothing to be gained by spoiling it enraged over...

Well, now, that was strange. Why would he be enraged, exactly?

He set his spoon down carefully and thought.

Since when did I simply decide to give up and die, especially when my life is finally improving? I have finally found somewhere I belong, and now I am supposed to simply give up and disappear? And since when is Miss Granger even remotely capable of premeditated murder?

He looked at his stew, and a knowing smirk grew on his lips.

However, concealing potions in someone's favourite food is something of which she has been capable since she was a second-year. I wonder if she realises I am aware of that?

She had been right, of course. The paranoia, the fatalism, it had all been part of the Dark Lord's curse. It appeared she had found a way to counter at least that portion of it. In a book, naturally, but she would have had to draw on and assemble disparate bits of information, much as she must have done in discovering the primary counter-curse. It seemed she had come a long way from the student he remembered.

The smirk faded.

While he no longer thought she was planning to steal the remainder of his strength and kill him in the process, he still had no desire for a pity fuck from her. Looking at his skeletal hands, he knew that was certainly all it could be. He was in no condition to even attempt some of the things they had done only a few short days ago. For that matter, if her climax were required, it would most likely fall to her to ensure it.

Is your life worth that, Snivellus? To be shagged by a beautiful witch who feels sorry for you and, if she's to enjoy it at all, has to take matters into her own hands?

He was a Slytherin. Survival was his first order of business.

As soon as he finished his meal, he rang for the elf to clear away the tray and to help him wash. Then, he managed to convey with gestures that he wished to speak with the woman. With Hermione.

A Worthy Attempt

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape have managed to find their respective places in the post-Voldemort wizarding world, but when they cross paths, things may take a bit of a turn. Note: warning is not for main pairing characters.

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A Worthy Attempt

Hermione wasn't sure what to expect when the elf came to fetch her. What she did not expect was to see a freshly washed and arranged Severus Snape sitting up in bed, gesturing for her to take a seat in a nearby chair. She did so cautiously, unsure whether he'd eaten the potion-laced stew, and if so, whether it had worked.

"Mi ... Hermione," he said. "I believe I have you to thank for the reprieve from the psychological effects of the Dark Lord's curse."

"Ye-es," she replied. "You're welcome."

He waved this away dismissively.

"For as long as it lasts, we should make use of the opportunity to talk clearly about the counter-curse you believe you have found," he said. "Kindly outline your research and the reasons you believe this will be effective."

Feeling very much like she was back in school, a feeling not at all comfortable while conversing with her nightshirt-clad former professor as he sat in bed, she did as he asked. By the time she had finished, he was nodding.

"I believe you are correct," he pronounced.

What, no House points? Well, no, probably not.

"While it would be a violation of our prior agreement, as you so eloquently pointed out, I have not returned to my normal life as was also stipulated, and so our agreement appears to be null and void."

She did not know how to respond to that. Fortunately, he did not wait for her to do so.

"I wish to live, Hermione," he said. "If the effects of your potion should wear off, let the record show that I authorise you to take extraordinary measures to implement the counter-curse if necessary."

At that, she shuddered.

"It should last at least several hours," she said, "and I can renew the dose, if necessary."

"As the potion does nothing to affect memory, I will no doubt remember what you have done and refuse to eat or drink anything, considering it simply more proof of your supposed plot."

He had a point.

"Then we should not waste time," she said finally.

"You realise this may not work."

"I know," she replied, "but we have to try."

For the first time, she realised how forced his expression appeared. It took her a moment to decide what to make of that.

"Severus, I... I wish it wasn't like this. But at some point, I think I would have wanted to try it again, anyway."

It took him even longer to reply.

"I might have come to the same conclusion, eventually," he conceded. "However, this will not be ..."

She stood, took a couple of steps closer to the bed, and sat on the edge.

"No, it won't," she agreed. "But if we ever do decide to try it again when neither one of us is dying from some stupid curse, then it will be. Right now, it just has to work."

He nodded stiffly, and she decided that if it were to have any chance of working, it was going to be up to her. She reached over, touched his cheek gently, and then brought her mouth to his.

~*~

It was nothing like their frantic, lust-filled coupling of several nights prior. In fact, deliberately evoking memories of that night seemed to be necessary in order for either of them to find the ability to function at first.

"Do you remember the way you tore at my robes?" she asked as he struggled to unbutton her blouse. She placed her soft hands over his bony ones and finished the job before guiding his hands to her small, firm, lace-covered breasts. "And the absolutely amazing things you did to my breasts?"

How could he forget? He could not do them now. Even with as little strength as he had, his fingers as they were now would surely bruise rather than pleasure her. But she had seemed to like the more feathery touches as well. He experimented a bit and was rewarded with a soft moan.

She undressed them both slowly, murmuring reminiscences as she went. Hearing her describe the various ways he had touched her, tasted her, driven her to the edge without ever quite letting her past it, was more erotic than he could ever have imagined. And while he could not even attempt most of those things now, clearly the memories were fuelling her as well because when she sank down onto him, she was every bit as hot and wet as he remembered.

The sight of her riding him, grinding herself against him, pleasuring herself with his body, was easily one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. Faster than had happened since his first teenaged fumbblings, he was coming, and he gritted his teeth in a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment.

She continued to grind herself against him, even as he softened inside her, and when the telltale fluttering of her walls began, he dared to risk sliding his thumb between them. Her wordless cry, and the fierce way her body tightened around him, almost made him smile. When she collapsed on top of him and panted against his neck, he could almost forget everything else.

"Did it work?" she asked breathlessly. "Do you feel any different?"

He couldn't be sure. He thought he might feel a bit less weak, but he didn't feel like he was ready to try standing up, much less casting even the simplest spells.

"Let us see in the morning," he replied cautiously, keeping his expression neutral.

She apparently took this as an invitation to remain in his bed until morning and curled up beside him. In minutes she was asleep.

He found that he did not mind.

Evaluating the Results

Chapter 10 of 11

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Evaluating the Results

Severus awoke as he always did: suddenly. His eyes snapped open, and he took in the increasingly familiar surroundings quickly. There was the barest moment of stabbing fear replaced promptly with the memory of why he was waking up here and with whom. Glancing at the tangle of curls on the pillow beside him, he felt a strange smile form on his lips.

She stirred, and he erased the expression from his face. Now that she had done her bit to save the day, she would surely leave. If nothing else, she would need to make arrangements for their return to England.

He decided to try sitting at the edge of the bed for a moment. When he swung his legs out from under the covers, they felt a bit less leaden than they had done for days. When he inched closer to the edge, letting his feet take a bit of his weight, he thought he really might be a bit stronger.

Considering I could barely sit without help yesterday, I must be.

He picked up his wand and cast a quick *Lumos*. Blue light glowed at the tip, just as it should.

It worked.

Not quite willing to risk a fall, particularly with her still there, he eased back onto the bed rather than trying to stand. He needed to go to the loo, but Granger's presence was something of an obstacle. He drew the covers back over himself and shook her shoulder.

She blinked up at him blearily. A look of confusion crossed her features, and then suddenly her eyes widened, and she sat bolt upright, clearly oblivious to her nudity.

"Did it work? Are you cured?" she asked breathlessly.

"I have managed a spell any first-year should be able to cast with ease," he replied. "Whether that represents a full cure remains to be seen."

Her face lit up.

"Severus, that's wonderful!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck.

"Miss Granger, if you please," he muttered, willing himself to ignore the way her... well, the way she was pressing against him.

She pulled back as if he had slapped her.

"I... thank you for your assistance," he said stiffly. "Now, I believe it would be best if we were to return to our original agreement."

She continued to stare at him.

"That would require you to leave."

Her look of hurt was quickly replaced with the cold mask she'd worn at the Victory Party. He forced himself not to wince.

"As you wish," she said, and she got out of his bed and hastily dressed herself. When she had finished and was reaching for the door, she turned and added, "I'll tell Viktor that he can prepare to remove the curse. Even if... well, there's no point leaving something like that lying about."

He nodded curtly, willing her to just be on her way. Once the door closed behind her, he slumped in some odd mixture of relief and something else he did not care to identify. At least he could finally go to the loo, even though it would be prudent to have assistance.

"Elf!" he barked.

~*~

Hermione was on her way back to her room, head down, when she collided with something rather solid. She almost lost her balance, but then large hands caught and steadied her.

"Vat is vrong, Herm-own-ninny?" Viktor asked.

"Nothing," she replied firmly. "It worked. He's getting ready for breakfast."

"Ah," he replied. "I will prepare to remove the curse after, and then perhaps we can haff a short visit before you return home?"

She smiled, took the arm he was offering and walked with him back toward her room. "Perhaps a short one. We really should get back. I don't know how to thank you for your help, Viktor."

"You are always velcome, Herm-own-ninny. I vish things could have gone better for you."

"I told you, Viktor, it was never like that. Now things can get back to normal," she said as they reached her door. "I'll come back and have a real visit soon. When will Emiliya be back from Indonesia?"

"It will be a few more weeks," he replied. "The delegation is haffing trouble communicating vith the local trade authorities."

She thought that might, indeed, be rather challenging.

"Owl me when she's back, then, and I'll arrange some time off."

"You expect to be travelling alone, then?"

"Viktor..." she began warningly.

"Off course. I will see you at breakfast." With a smile and a nod, he turned and left.

She sighed and went into her room to change. She wasn't sure why Severus' attitude bothered her so much. It was entirely typical. Besides, he was right. There was no reason they shouldn't just go back to their original agreement.

She picked up her brush and began working out the tangles in her hair a bit more roughly than usual.

~*~

Though the effects of the curse had been negated, Severus found that he had several lingering reminders of it. His physical strength had improved dramatically, but so much of his body had begun to waste away that it would clearly be some time before he was back to his prior health, if ever, even with the aid of the most potent Strengthening Solutions. Also, he felt only very slightly less hostile toward his host and benefactor.

It had been only the work of a few minutes to remove the curse after breakfast. Had he but known it was a separate spell, or rather combination of hexes, he could surely have done this himself years ago. One did not even need all the information this overgrown Seeker and Miss Granger had dug through in order to remove it, at least not when it was inactive.

Now he was home. A Floo-call to the Ministry to inform them of his continued life and health, an appointment to have this confirmed at the infirmary later, and he had a couple of hours to spare. He decided to spend the time taking inventory of his potions supplies and making notes of the ingredients he would need to replenish in order to make the assorted potions he would need, both for himself and to send to Krum by way of thanks. He did not plan to remain in the man's debt any longer than necessary.

He had no plan how to repay his debt to Miss Granger.

~*~

Hermione collected Crookshanks from the neighbour who had been watching him. He purred loudly when he saw her and did not stop even when they arrived at her flat. When she set him down, he began methodically exploring the rooms, as if to make sure all was as it should be.

She wondered if tomorrow would bring a backlog of mail. There were several things she had been expecting which might, or might not, have been rerouted to Bulgaria and which might, therefore, have to be rerouted again to London.

The wizarding world needed some system for simply putting one's mail on hold while away for a short while. Solving things for the wizarding world was her department, but fixing the mail was not. She wondered if she could convince Calman to put it under her department at least long enough to fix that little glitch. Then again, owls and the mail were not exactly mysteries.

When she got to her bedroom, she was surprised to see Crookshanks in his usual spot on her bed. Well, that wasn't what surprised her. The fact that he was walking around and around his pillow sniffing it, that was a bit odd.

"What in the world are you doing, Crooks?"

He mewed at her, giving her an expectant look very much like the one that he wore while awaiting his breakfast.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at her cat.

"Not you, too!" she huffed. "Get over it! It was just the once. Well, twice. But he won't be back here, and you can just stop looking at me like that!"

Crookshanks jumped off the bed and padded over to her to entwine himself around her ankles.

"It just figures he's the one you'd approve of, now, doesn't it?" she sighed, bending to pick him up again. She buried her face in his fur and sighed again before setting him back down. "But it's back to normal around here. Just you and me, Crooks."

He mewed sadly.

Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

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Epilogue

October 31

Only very few people knew where the graves at Godric's Hollow were. Harry had asked her to add Diversion Charms to them the first time he had visited. She thought he might have had some idea he would not survive his last confrontation with Voldemort, even then, because there was no other reason to suspect the rest of the wizarding world would suddenly want to visit his parents' graves.

Now that his was among them, of course, the rest of the wizarding world would have liked very much to find them.

They were not quite as well protected as they would be under a Fidelius Charm, but no one who had not visited them before the charms were cast could find them. Hermione had argued that there might be other friends of theirs that Harry didn't know who came to visit, and they should be allowed to continue doing so. When she had agreed to include a charm to specifically repel Peter Pettigrew, he had finally given in.

And it appeared she had been right on more than one count.

"What's he doing here?" Ron asked incredulously. "He hated Harry and his parents!"

Hermione shushed him and whispered, "He hated Harry's dad. I think he rather fancied Harry's mum."

"What?"

"Sh!"

The still, black form stood up from where he had been kneeling at the middle grave. A single white rose remained on the ground. The graves to the left and right, belonging to James and Harry, were unadorned.

She wondered if this was a yearly ritual for him, and if so, why she had never seen any sign of his presence. If, on the other hand, this was the first time in many years, why now?

When he turned and saw them, he appeared briefly startled before his face settled into its customary emotionless mask. His face appeared less skeletal than when she had seen him last, though still far more gaunt than he had been just prior. He offered curt but silent nods to them both and walked past them as he left.

"Mr. Snape," she heard herself call out to his retreating back.

"Hermione!" Ron whispered desperately.

Snape turned to look back at them.

"Well, what is it, Miss Granger?" he asked when she did not continue right away.

"If you aren't busy tomorrow, perhaps we could have dinner and discuss whether to repeat that experiment under more favourable conditions." There, that sounded self-assured and potentially innocuous. Well, potentially innocuous to Ron's ears in any case.

He raised an eyebrow, and she wondered if she could get hold of that now uncursed Time-Turner and take the words back.

"Perhaps," he said, his voice and expression completely inscrutable.

She nodded and turned back to Ron feeling a bit relieved. The lack of scathing sarcasm was tantamount to enthusiastic acceptance, she rather thought.

"What was that all about?" he demanded.

"Exactly what I said, Ron," she replied. "Come on, it's going to be dark soon."

She tugged him along with her to the three graves so they could make their twice-yearly visit with Harry and his parents. A sad smile came to her lips as she thought of what Harry would have to say about her asking Severus on a date, here of all places. She wondered if, wherever he was, he might understand better now.

As she set down the bouquets that they had brought, she was careful not to disturb the white rose.

Fin.

A/N: As I mentioned before the first chapter, this story was written for the SSHG_Exchange on LiveJournal for the Summer 2007 round. My prompt from Clare009 was the following: *Set after the war, in a fit of lust, Hermione sleeps with Snape. Unfortunately, a deadly curse, a parting gift from a now dead Dark Lord, is activated by the act. How do they deal with the curse and their uncertain feelings towards each other?* So in addition to the thanks I've posted to those who helped me produce this, I have to add huge thanks to Clare009 for coming up with such a great prompt that really let me sink my teeth into it.