

One-Upmanship

by Moreteadk

Lucius and Severus had been friends for countless years. Over the course of their life the exchange of gifts at birthdays and Christmas had morphed into a game of hate gifts.

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Bambu deserves at least half credit for this, as she came up with half the plot (and the title) in a comment thread on LJ that spiralled out of control. So I'll dedicate this piece to you, Bambu, and I hope you find it as much fun in these words as we had when we came up with plot. *hugs*

Also many thanks to Angelicwitch who betaed for me.

Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape had been old friends since their Hogwarts days and Death Eater comrades for countless years. Of course, there was the small problem of Severus being a spy, but Lucius was of the opinion that if he didn't think about it, it didn't exist. As such good friends, they naturally exchanged gifts at birthdays and Christmas.

Particularly at Christmas.

In the beginning, they went out of their way to find something the other would appreciate, but at some point in time their previously so nice and considerate gifts somehow got turned into a competition of who could give the other the most appalling hate-gifts. None of them were entirely certain when it had happened, but Severus' theory was that it had started the year Lucius had forgotten to buy Severus something and, influenced by a couple of glasses of extremely expensive port, had made the fatal error of sending a house-elf to do some last minute shopping for him. Lucius then sent an owl to Severus with the gift, failing to check the contents of the parcel first, and actually went so far as to pat the elf on the head, congratulating it on a job well done. The poor elf was so shocked by this that it had to stay in bed for several days, fearing that it was hallucinating.

It turned out the elf thought it was shopping for Lucius' mother, and normalcy was reinstated at Malfoy Manor when Lucius wanted to know exactly why his good friend Severus kept claiming that Lucius had given him a purple shawl with an embroidered tabby kitten on it for Christmas.

To Severus, Lucius, of course, denied having given him any such thing and stood fast on the point that Severus must have had too much mulled wine. Not even when Severus quickly discarded his original gift for Lucius and brewed up a batch of Insta-Beard Lotion, which he cleverly disguised as a nourishing and wrinkle-prohibiting face lotion, did Lucius admit his mistake. The year after that Lucius retaliated with a *Potions For Beginners* book, complete with illustrations and helpful memorising rhymes. A tradition was born.

Narcissa had been aware of this childish game of theirs from the beginning. Once in a while, she got concerned with the nature of the gifts sent back and forth. The year Severus got a pair of fish-net stockings and the year Lucius had received three pairs of glow-in-the-dark undershorts had been particularly bad years. Especially the latter,

as Narcissa discovered to her cost that Lucius found the underwear hilarious and surprised her that same evening by wearing a pair to bed. She had found it quite a turn-off when the shorts started flashing brightly as soon as Lucius had an erection.

This was also the reason she always insisted that Lucius open his gifts from Severus in private immediately upon receiving it. She did not want Draco to be subjected to that sort of lurid presents.

This particular year, Lucius had been fretting for a while. When Draco came home for the holidays, Lucius still hadn't received a gift from Severus. He was beginning to worry that the other wizard had forgotten about him or didn't want to play any more. Narcissa was secretly elated about this apparent stop to an undignified game, but she didn't say anything.

On Christmas morning, however, Narcissa's hopes were shattered, and Lucius was relieved to find his gift from Severus under the tree. The only problem was the elder Mrs. Malfoy having seen him find it. Lucius didn't really like the prospect of opening a gift from Severus in front of his mother. Who knew what might be in it? He even tried to hide it again, but the old hag caught him and voiced her firm opinion on the matters of Christmas, gifts, family and gratitude.

Mother was entirely too nosy for her own good, Lucius thought with a sigh and reluctantly started to unwrap the present. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught his beloved wife smirking malevolently at his impending humiliation. Women! You just couldn't trust them.

The first feeling Lucius experienced upon removing the lid from the box was immense relief. The second feeling was slight regret at having sent Severus a stuffed, mounted and singing reindeer head. The box contained a rather dashing waistcoat of pretty pink brocade. Lucius wasn't certain why Severus had chosen to send him something nice this year, but he did wish that he would have let him know about it in advance. He hoped his friend wouldn't get too annoyed at receiving that reindeer in exchange for this nice waistcoat.

Lucius put the waistcoat on, and to his delight he found it fit him as if tailored. He fingered the pink brocade and barely even noticed his mother's shocked expression or Narcissa questioning Draco in the background. He didn't even hear the confused Draco confessing that Professor Snape had given it to him with orders to put it under the tree.

Narcissa was livid. Lucius had been wearing that ridiculous waistcoat all day. She didn't understand how he could be so enamoured with it. It was pink brocade, for Merlin's sake! It couldn't possibly get any more effeminate.

If only he would take it off for a moment so that she could see if Severus had woven some sort of jinx into the fabric that would compel Lucius to love it against his better judgement. She hadn't been able to spot any evidence of such spellwork while he was wearing it, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

Furthermore, and this was what really rankled her, Severus had enlisted Draco's help. Narcissa felt she had been patient with them and this stupid game of theirs and only insisted that they kept her little boy out of it. Now Severus had involved him anyway, just to make sure that she didn't catch that stupid gift of his before Christmas morning. Who knew what sort of lewd material he might otherwise tell her son to carry?!

She sat down at her writing desk to compose a scathing Howler to Severus. He would hear her opinion on the matter, and she would make certain he never disregarded her again. She would have to try and figure out how to make sure Severus would receive her owl at the breakfast table for the full effect. Narcissa had just written herself warm when Lucius entered.

"Hello, dear," he greeted her without taking his eyes away from the heavy winter cloak in his hands.

It was an automatic greeting, and Narcissa wouldn't be surprised if he actually hadn't even realised she was there. She knew that expression on his face all too well. He had an idea and was working out what to do about it, what he might achieve by it, what it would cost, and whether or not it would be worth it. It worried her that he was directing that particular expression towards his best winter cloak and seemingly comparing it to that silly waistcoat.

Her sense of alarm increased when Lucius stood in front of a mirror, holding the cloak up to himself for a direct comparison between the pink brocade of his waistcoat and the dark hunter green of his cloak. When he summoned the seamstress house-elf, Narcissa hastily made her excuses, fetched her own cloak, and Disapparated within seconds.

She appeared on the main street of Hogsmeade and went towards Hogwarts by foot. Her pace was fast, and she was angry enough that she didn't notice getting a bit winded by the exercise. She couldn't wait for a Howler to reach Severus; she was going to howl at him herself. It wouldn't be at the breakfast table for obvious reasons, but it would work just as well. If she got the chance, she might even punch the bastard. It was his fault that Lucius was getting his best cloak embroidered at this very moment. Narcissa didn't harbour any hopes that it wasn't going to happen. She knew very well that, although Lucius would ask the elf for her opinion, the elf would have whichever opinion it thought Lucius would want it to have.

Arriving at the Hogwarts gates, she had worked herself up to a considerable state of agitation and had started rehearsing what to shout at Severus in her head. She didn't even notice that she wasn't alone anymore until someone said, "Oh! Excuse me," when she bumped into them.

It was Professor Sprout, and she looked like she had just come out from the greenhouses. Her robes were mussed and there was dirt on her face. Narcissa cast a quick glance down the front of her own clothes, making sure none of the dirt had got on her.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Malfoy," Sprout said, holding out a hand in greeting. "I trust your son is well?"

Narcissa looked at the professor's hand. It was all brown and black with dirt, and her nails looked atrocious. It was with great reluctance that she shook it, and as soon as Professor Sprout looked away, she discretely wiped her hand on her handkerchief.

"He's quite well, thank you," Narcissa replied. "Draco is not the reason I'm here. I'm here to speak with Severus Snape. I have... urgent business to discuss with him."

"I don't know if he's in his quarters at the moment, but I can show you where they are, so you can wait for him there if he isn't," Sprout said.

Professor Sprout left her at Severus' door, and as soon as the other witch was out of sight, Narcissa started pounding furiously on it. She didn't stop until Severus opened the door and let her in.

Severus nearly jumped out of his skin and accidentally tipped over his bottle of red ink on someone's homework when someone suddenly started beating on his door. Angrily, he cleaned up the mess with a wave of his wand and went to see who was so keen to be let in. It sounded as if whoever it was were trying to make the door break right off its hinges.

He couldn't for the life of him guess who it might be. Only the Head Students knew where the staff's private quarters were located, and they had strict orders to only make use of the information under the direst of circumstances. Most of the students had gone home for the Christmas holiday, including both the Head Girl and the Head Boy. He hadn't had any particularly nasty arguments with any of his colleagues lately either, so he couldn't imagine why it would be any of them.

Wand in hand, he tore the door open only to have Narcissa nearly continue her knocking on his ribcage. She looked furious, and Severus couldn't think what he could have done to make her so angry with him, but he guessed it must have something to do with Lucius' Christmas present. Compared to some of the other gifts he had sent Lucius over the years, this one was fairly light-weight. He had been pressed for ideas, and he wasn't too pleased with what he had come up with. Especially not when compared to that bloody reindeer Lucius had sent him. It had taken him several Silencing Charms and a fair number of hexes just to make it stop singing.

Narcissa glared at him as she walked past him and waited for him to close the door. Barely had he let go of the door handle before she started shouting.

"What on earth did you have to go and do a thing like that for?! Now Lucius is wearing that stupid waistcoat of yours and I can't make him take it off. Pink ~~is~~ not his colour, in fact pink is *no* wizard's colour. It's undignified and scandalizing to have a grown man walking around in baby pink!" she screamed.

"You mean he liked it?" Severus asked with a frown.

The waistcoat might have been a light-weight gift, but to have it completely fail to hit the mark like that was somewhat disappointing.

"Yes! That's the problem, aren't you listening to me? He won't take the blasted thing off, and at this moment he is, in all likelihood, getting his winter cloak embroidered!"

"Embroidered?" Severus repeated, uncertain of whether or not to believe his own ears. "In pink, I gather?"

"Probably."

The waistcoat had been bought with the intention to be immensely disliked and retaliated upon, but then the thought of Lucius wearing it popped into his head. He could just picture the other wizard primping in front of the mirror, wearing baby pink brocade. Then he pictured Lucius wearing a cloak on top of it, a cloak embroidered with pink, white and yellow in a large floral pattern, and suddenly his initial disappointment vanished like dew in sunshine. He must look ridiculous. In Severus' head, the next step must be for Lucius to wear flowers in his hair, and he vowed to try and get him to do that. Just once.

"If you do not stop laughing, you greasy bastard, I will turn every hair on your body pink, and ~~they~~you can see how you like it!" Narcissa threatened.

Severus did his best to contain his laughter and to wipe every trace of smirking from his face.

"Look, Narcissa, you *know* why I sent him that waistcoat, and you*know* I definitely didn't expect him to like it so much," he paused to get another smirk under control before she saw it, "so you can hardly blame me for your husband's taste in clothing. It's neither my fault, nor my problem if his taste clashes with yours."

Narcissa wasn't finished though.

"And furthermore," she continued, as if Severus hadn't spoken at all, "I've told both you and Lucius several times to leave Draco out of this disturbed little game of yours. I don't want him carrying Merlin knows what for you, and I don't want the two of you influencing him in that direction. You *know* I have been very tolerant in spite of some truly disgusting things that have been brought into my home over the years, but I will *not* have Draco mixed up in your sick gift exchanges."

Severus rolled his eyes. He could see why she didn't want her son to be aware of the contents of some of the presents he and Lucius had exchanged over the years, but to be so upset for having asked the boy to carry a present when Severus was running late in sending it, was a bit over the top. If he had told Draco to give the present to his father, and he then didn't see it under the tree Christmas morning, the boy would surely have raised questions.

"You can hardly find anything lewd in a simple waistcoat, Narcissa," Severus told her, now slightly annoyed. "Besides, it's not as if he knew what was inside it. It was only because I hadn't managed to get an owl out in time."

Narcissa didn't look convinced.

"He's not a little boy anymore, Narcissa. He's nearly a grown man. You can't protect him forever, you know."

Narcissa didn't answer, but she gave him a hard look and left without a word, slamming the door behind her.

Three months later

Malfoy Manor, March 16th

-Severus,

As I have some business to attend to in Hogsmeade next Saturday, I was thinking we could meet and have a drink afterwards.

I asked Narcissa if there was anything she wanted me to tell you, but it appears she's cross with you for some reason. Whatever did you do?

-LM

Hogwarts, March 16th

-Lucius,

Next Saturday is a Hogsmeade weekend and, as I'm not overseeing students this time, I would be free to have drinks for the entire afternoon. Floo me when you're finished with your meeting.

As for Narcissa, I haven't got a clue. Do give her my best, though.

-SS

Severus was the first to arrive at the Three Broomsticks, and he chose a table near a corner away from the door. It was a little more private and away from where the students mostly sat. He ordered an Old Ogden's while he waited for Lucius to show up. He had only just had a sip when Lucius entered the pub with every ounce of his usual arrogance firmly in place. Severus was amazed that he could make that work, even while wearing a waistcoat in pink brocade and a hunter green cloak with a large-patterned pink embroidery. Severus had honestly found it a bit difficult to believe Narcissa when she had said that Lucius was far too fond of that waistcoat Severus had given him for Christmas. He had thought Lucius might just have pretended to like it so much just to tease his wife, but now that he saw his friend, it was obvious that Lucius really thought he was looking his finest ever. Only the hasty thought of Longbottom unleashed in his Potions classroom helped Severus keep a straight face. How Lucius couldn't realise how utterly ridiculous he looked was completely beyond him.

Lucius walked through the pub, enjoying what he thought were admiring glances and smiles from the other guests. He nodded at Severus when he saw him, but before he reached the table, his attention was distracted by a group of young girls eyeing him. Severus suddenly stopped finding the situation funny and watched in horror as Lucius obviously grasped the wrong end of a very long stick. The blond wizard stopped at their table and leaned in to say something, gesturing at Severus with one hand. Severus couldn't hear what he said, but the group of girls all glanced in his direction and giggled behind their hands. When Lucius moved away from their table, smirk on his face, the girls leaned in towards each other, and Severus didn't have to be able to hear them to know that they were whispering about Lucius and himself. He noticed with dismay that one of them was in his Potions N.E.W.T.s class.

Severus sighed as he realised that there was probably nothing, barring natural disasters, that could stop the rumour mill now, and it was all Lucius' fault. He scowled at his former friend as Lucius sat down and signalled the serving maid. She too failed miserably at hiding an amused smile at Lucius' attire, and Lucius preened and smiled back.

"Old Ogden's," he ordered, then added, "Looks good, doesn't it?" He pushed his cloak aside, so that she could see the waistcoat better. To Severus' dismay, Lucius gestured at him over the table. "My good friend Severus here gave it to me for Christmas. I must say, I didn't know he possessed such excellent taste."

The serving maid just nodded politely, but Severus saw the corner of her mouth twitch when she walked away from the table to fetch Lucius' drink. Although he knew that she was most likely laughing at the both of them, he couldn't say he blamed her. Neither could he say he blamed Draco Malfoy for his reaction when entering the pub and seeing his father. Severus watched as the young Mr. Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks. There was a stricken expression on his face as he quickly herded Crabbe and Goyle back outside before either of them could see and recognise Lucius. Quite a feat, Severus thought, as Crabbe and Goyle were both significantly larger than Draco was.

Four months later

For the last months of the school year, Severus had done his best to keep the rumour spreading at an absolute minimum, using generous handing out of detentions and taking vast amounts of house points at any given opportunity. He felt it helped some, and by the time the students left for the summer, he had been certain the rumours about him, the brocaded waistcoat, and his alleged 'excellent taste' had been crushed good and proper.

Therefore, nothing had prepared him for what happened in the sitting room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place after an Order meeting, just as he was getting ready to return to his quarters at Hogwarts. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Kingsley Shacklebolt as the dark Auror entered the room with two glasses of Old Ogden's and a truly odd expression on his face. That tiny little smile and those partly closed eyes... Bad omens, if ever Severus saw any.

Severus cautiously accepted the drink Kingsley handed him. He didn't know why the Auror would suddenly be offering him drinks, or what he could possibly want to talk to Severus about. As far as he could remember, they had barely exchanged two words at the meetings and even fewer outside the meetings. In true Slytherin fashion, he hid his confusion and sat down in a large armchair as if he had been meaning to do so all along.

Kingsley seemed uncharacteristically nervous and actually shifted from one foot to another until Severus looked at him, one eyebrow raised in question. Then he went to sit at the end of the sofa, close to Severus' chair. They sat there silently for several minutes, each minding his own drink, but Severus noticed that Kingsley kept looking at him. It made him uncomfortable, and he took a larger sip of his drink, hoping to finish it soon so he could get back to Hogwarts.

On the sofa, Kingsley took a deep breath and reached over to take one of Severus' hands, lightly caressing the top of it with his thumb.

"You know, Severus... should you ever tire of seeing Malfoy--" was about as far as he got before Severus choked and spluttered. Some of the firewhiskey spray probably hit Kingsley in the face, but Severus was too shocked and too angry to care. He jumped out of his chair and departed hastily without a single word.

It was all Lucius' fault! Him with his embroidery and penchant for showing off. If he had just hated that stupid waistcoat like he was supposed to, all of this would never have happened. Well, actually, if he really thought about it, Lucius liking the waistcoat and having his best cloak lavishly embroidered was still rather funny. Publicly crediting Severus for it, however, was not. Spreading rumours, however unintentional, about Severus' sexual orientation was most definitely not. This joke had gone on quite long enough, and Severus was determined to put a stop to it once and for all. He could only hope that Kingsley's attempt at making a pass at him was just a freak occurrence, but he couldn't be sure.

It wasn't until Severus arrived at Malfoy Manor that he noticed that he was still carrying half a drink of Old Ogden's. He drained the glass in one gulp and handed it to the house-elf that met him in the foyer.

"Get Lucius down here," he demanded. "Now!"

The elf's huge eyes turned even wider and rounder. She wasn't unused to being spoken to in a harsh manner, but that didn't mean she liked it.

"But Master is in the bath," she protested weakly.

"I don't care. Fetch him."

"But Master said not to be disturbed. Master will be angry. Master will *punish!*" the elf continued desperately.

"He'll live. Fetch him, or I'll punish you myself and make you wish you would merely have to deal with Lucius' form of punishment," Severus growled.

"But--"

Severus directed a piercing glare at the elf. She seemed to shrink under his eyes and disappeared with a small pop. Moments later Lucius descended the stairs, wearing a flamingo pink housecoat, looking like he was trying to simultaneously impress, dazzle, charm and intimidate his guest. To be fair, it was a skill that he normally had down perfectly, but it had never quite worked on Severus, and it certainly didn't work when the colour pink was involved.

Before Lucius had a chance to blink, or indeed duck, or call for help, Severus had aimed his wand at him and transformed the housecoat into a cocktail dress of clinging black silk.

"Honestly, Lucius," he sneered, "if you really expect people to think you have charisma, there's nothing like black silk to show off that white mop upon your head."

Lucius stared at Severus in shock. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, as if he wanted to say something, but the words didn't quite come. It looked like his lack of concentration was at least partially caused by the way his hands were stroking the luxurious material.

"Pink does absolutely nothing for your complexion, you know," Severus added sourly before Disapparating, leaving the blond wizard to explore the feel of silk on his naked body.

Two months later

Lucius couldn't figure out why Severus would do something like this, but he did rather like the sensation the silk caused and the way it clung to his body. It was definitely something worth experimenting with.

Narcissa was relieved with this new fascination of his. Black silk was so much more dignified and manly. She wasn't entirely pleased with the fact that Severus had chosen to put her husband in a frock, but it was still better than the pink.

Then she noticed something highly suspicious about her wardrobe. It started with a misplaced corset. Then two of her gowns suddenly and mysteriously switched places in the otherwise very organised closet. Then it was an odd stretching of seams in her silk undies. When she discovered a burst seam in her newest, extremely expensive, pink silk couture gown, *and* a funny spot on it, the migraine set in, and she had to go lie down.

As soon as she felt semi-human again, suspicion led her once more to Severus' door to interrogate, but not unexpectedly the blasted man denied everything. Still, she was certain that it was his spellwork that was the cause of her molested wardrobe. Her evidence was clear as day when she came home and caught Lucius with her finest robes wrapped around his naked body and pumping his rather large erection with his hand.

Narcissa watched him all wrought with passion and rubbing her dress against his skin while masturbating. Well then! Now she knew where that funny stain on her pink

gown came from. Turning on her heel, she left the bedroom, planning a very loud Howler to be owled to Severus and then the untimely death of her husband.

Meanwhile, in Severus' quarters, Hermione knocked on the door and waited to be let in, nervously fingering the corner of the book she was carrying.

"Miss Granger? To what do I owe the... pleasure?"

"I've brought you something. It's a present," Hermione said.

Severus looked suspiciously at the book she was holding out to him. It was thoughtful of her to want to give him a gift, of course, but he couldn't see why she would do such a thing. He took the book from her and looked at the title.

"*How to Come Out to Your Closest Friends; A Handbook*," he read out loud in disbelief. Then he shoved the book back in her arms. "I am not a poof!"

Hermione didn't look surprised at his reaction and tapped a nail against the book cover.

"According to I. B. Queer, denial is one of the first clear signs," she told him and pushed past him.

Severus stared at the cheeky witch. Did she always just shove her way into other people's sitting rooms like that? And what was she even doing back at the school in the first place? She placed the book on the corner of the coffee table and slowly walked around the room, taking in her surroundings.

"It was a gift," he stammered quickly when she started fingering the edge of the cashmere throw along the back of the sofa.

Hermione turned towards him, and he could see what she was about to say. There was a tell-tale know-it-all gleam in her eyes. What he did next, he did out of sheer panic, but once he had her body pressed hard against his own, and his tongue twining with hers, he figured he might as well get the most out of it. Judging from the way she was gasping when he finally let go of her, he had done a good job.

To his surprise, she just smiled gently at him and tenderly put a finger on his lips.

"You don't have to pretend with me, Severus. I've always respected you, and I always will, regardless of your sexual orientation."

That was more of a provocation than Severus could take. He narrowed his eyes for a moment. Then, before she had a chance to move away, he grabbed her and strode into his bedroom, carrying her over his shoulder. She bounced a little when he threw her down on top of the mattress, staring at him in wide-eyed surprise.

Severus cocked his head slightly to the side, rather enjoying the view of her wild, unmanageable hair fanning out across his dark green pillows and the way her breasts moved with every startled breath she drew.

"I'd be delighted to come out of the closet, if that's what you really want, Miss Granger," he said, climbing onto the bed and crawling up along her body, until his knees were resting on either side of her hips. He raised both her hands above her head, trapping them both in a firm grip with one of his own, and used the index finger of his free hand to trace the outline of her lips. "I'm a hedonist, Hermione. Would you like me to show you what that means?"

Neither of them noticed the owl arriving nor the red envelope it left behind before quickly taking off again. They were busy. Hermione was writhing on the bed, her hands bound to the headboard and Severus' cock firmly buried inside her. Severus thrust mercilessly, taking great pleasure in each and every sigh and moan he elicited from her lips.

Behind them, on the floor near the window, the red envelope started shivering and wriggling, and after another couple of minutes where nobody paid any attention to it, it burst open in a cloud of smoke and a long flare of fire.

Severus was just on the verge of climax when the Howling started. Narcissa's voice ranted and raved in a high-pitched tone, and it was using words that he hadn't thought a witch of her upbringing and status would even know existed. His cock went completely soft as Narcissa's Howler accused him of being solely responsible for Lucius' sudden obsession with pink silk, and the destruction of her favourite and very expensive robes, as well as demanding that he not only make sure that her robes were replaced but also that he make Lucius come to his senses immediately. She even went so far as to suspect that there were underhanded hexes involved in the matter.

Severus sighed deeply and wearily shifted off of the pouting Hermione.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment, I think I'd better take care of a little bit of correspondence," he said, his voice practically dripping with irritation.

Hogwarts, September 25th

Dear Narcissa,

Upon receiving your last owl, I felt it best to respond with a bit of advice as soon as possible. Firstly, I can assure you that Lucius' perverted tendencies are absolutely none of my doing or concern. I strongly suggest that you learn to live with it and be happy that at least he's not out buying dresses for himself. Yet. Secondly, I suggest that you consider the advantages you might discover, if you were to dress up in skimpy silk robes and no underwear before entering the bedroom. If Lucius is truly as depraved as you say, you might find yourself pleasantly surprised by the outcome. Thirdly and lastly, I would greatly appreciate it if you would stop sending me Howlers. I was in the middle of something, and being Howled at not only wrecked my concentration, it also greatly annoyed my witch.

-Severus.

He quickly summoned his own owl and sent the letter off, and as Hermione licked him hard again, he promptly forgot all about it, deciding that the whole thing was probably just a show of annoyance at being interrupted at such an interesting moment.

Already the next morning, the large eagle owl belonging to Lucius Malfoy arrived at Severus' quarters again. Severus' irritation flared up immediately. The Malfoys seemed to have an uncanny ability to interrupt him at the most inopportune moments, but at least this time it wasn't a Howler. It carried a short note and a large triangular shaped package. With reluctance, Severus turned away from his breakfast of whipped cream and strawberries served on Hermione's tummy and quickly read the note before tossing it carelessly over his shoulder.

"What did it say?" Hermione asked, rubbing her foot against his leg.

"Lucius and Narcissa appear to be thanking me for something or other," he replied, not even bothering with an attempt at coming up with a reason for why they would be doing that. He gestured at the triangular package, "There are some flowers too. For you."

"For me? What did I do?" Hermione asked in confusion.

Severus shrugged, and went back to licking her belly. "I have no idea. Perhaps it's just a show of politeness," he said. He wasn't about to tell her what Lucius had written, about how he was glad that Severus had finally found a witch of his own, but that the flowers were a show of sympathy and encouragement for the girl who would, undoubtedly, be in for a very trying time.

Three months later

Narcissa was happy that at least Draco had been left out of that stupid Christmas exchange this year. Of course, with Draco having left Hogwarts that same summer, it would have been a bit impractical for Severus to use him as courier. Nevertheless, she hoped Severus had simply just learned that she would have his hide, if he ever subjected her little boy to something like that again.

Especially, when Lucius unwrapped the book, *How to Come Out to Your Closest Friends; A Handbook* by I. B. Queer. At first he scoffed and smoothed his pink silk waistcoat with one hand. Then he started leafing through it, reading small passages here and there. A couple of hours later, he was reading the book with an increasingly concerned look on his face. It took him exactly two days to pluck up the courage to ask Narcissa if she thought he might be gay. After that, it took Narcissa exactly ten minutes to Apparate to the gates of Hogwarts and march down to Severus' door.

She thought she heard the faint noise of an unmistakably evil cackle from behind the door when she knocked, but she was surprised when it was opened, not by Severus but by that Muggle-born witch Draco had been complaining about constantly since he was eleven. It was clear by the look of her raised eyebrow and coolly polite face that she knew exactly who Narcissa was and what her family represented.

"Yes? May I help you?" Hermione asked when Narcissa just stared at her in surprise, her every angry word having died on her lips. She stared at the silk brocade Hermione was wearing, and how it fell over the slightly bulging belly. Narcissa took in her appearance and felt a sudden flare of sister solidarity. The other woman might just be a Mudblood, but Narcissa suspected that she was in for a good deal of the same hardships with Severus that Narcissa herself had been through with Lucius. She took Hermione's hand and pulled her out into the corridor.

"So you're Severus' new witch? No wonder he wouldn't let us meet you. Between you and me, dear, pink is no better on you than it is on Lucius," she said with a frown and with a swish and a flick turned Hermione's robes a deep burgundy instead. "There, that's much better. Promise me you'll have a talk with Severus about this odd obsession with the colour pink. I really don't think it's good for him."

Hermione nodded mutely, obviously surprised by this behaviour, but Narcissa wasn't finished.

"Let me give you a bit of advice, dear," she said, taking Hermione by the elbow and leading a bit farther away from the door. "When Severus receives presents or packages from Lucius, make sure that he opens them in at least a semi-private setting, as it's not likely to be something fit for the public eye. Try not to be disturbed by what's in it, it's really just a playful game of theirs, but it's something we probably have to live with."

Hermione nodded again. She had already noticed that. After all, that was why she had initially shown up with that book she had tried to give him, wasn't it?

"So I've noticed," she said. "I've developed a Transparency Charm, so I can see through the boxes and make small suitable changes if necessary." You didn't get to be the cleverest witch of your generation without a few creative and useful inventions.

Narcissa raised an eyebrow at that. "I would be interested in learning that one," she mused. "Why don't you come have tea with me on Tuesday and you can show me?"

Three years later

One afternoon tea turned into a habit, and the names of Malfoy and Snape slowly redeemed themselves to some small degree in the eyes of the wizarding world as it became common knowledge that Narcissa Malfoy had befriended a Muggle-born witch and took tea with her every other Tuesday.

It was even more popular when, some years later, the tabloid press discovered that Draco Malfoy had found himself the role model of little Sebastian Snape, who followed in the heels of the young man, chattering non-stop at his Uncle Draco. Luckily, the press hadn't yet caught the fact that Draco despised being called 'uncle', thinking it made him sound old, or the fact that Lucius was milking the positive publicity for all it was worth and more and had therefore told Draco to be a man and bear it. So Draco did, even when Sebastian showed him a drawing of two blue circles and few squiggly lines and not only expected Draco to be able to see that it was a picture of a sheep but to like it as well.

There was, however, one fly in the ointment. With Hermione and Narcissa's frequent use of Hermione's Transparency Charm, Severus and Lucius had lost their gift game. Lucius had suspected it was all over the year he had unwrapped a Christmas present from Severus that was both appropriate and tasteful, and his suspicions had only been confirmed when Severus had Flooed him the next day to ask, in a somewhat disappointed tone, what the meaning was with the gift he had received. Apparently, it had not only been sensible and appropriate, but something he had genuinely wished for. Definitely not the floral, bottomless underpants Lucius had sent.

Their little game having been ruined, Lucius soon found new ways of annoying Severus and disguising it as an act of generosity and friendship. There was no way Severus would ever be able to afford the opulent and expensive gifts Lucius sent little Sebastian at any given opportunity on a teacher's salary. He could only imagine how Lucius felt safe knowing this, and Sebastian certainly wasn't complaining. He had to think of something else, something that would shake Lucius at his very core.

The solution came to him one Friday afternoon during an uneventful Potions class. Normally, Severus expressed nothing but disdain for his students, calling most of them dunderheads from time to time. This year's seventh-year Potions class, however, was different. Somehow, he had ended up teaching a class full of utter swots, focused intently on their N.E.W.T.s and following his instructions to the letter. On an academic level he enjoyed it, since it gave him the chance to delve a bit deeper into the subject and include a few things that there normally wouldn't have been time for, but on a human level Severus found the class an utter bore and frequently caught himself wishing for a ruined potion or a cauldron explosion just to break the monotony.

Walking between the work tables and peering into cauldrons here and there, Severus' thoughts strayed back to the problem of how to show up Lucius, and his eyes fell on one of his students. Rose Zeller. Hufflepuff, dark haired, average looking, out-spoken with occasionally controversial opinions, slightly overweight and Muggle-born. She was about as far from the image of a typical Malfoy wife as she could possibly get. An evil smirk spread on his face. Next weekend the students would be visiting Hogsmeade. If he could lure Draco to Hogsmeade as well and brewed up a small batch of Amortentia... As Draco matured, he had turned into a rather strong-willed young man, and if he were to take an interest in someone like Miss Zeller, then there was nothing Lucius could do but watch in helpless frustration and hope Draco would lose interest quickly. There were such things as hate potions, but Severus knew that Lucius was far from an accomplished brewer. A potion strong enough to counter Amortentia was well beyond Lucius' abilities.

Ten years later

Hermione tossed the morning *Prophet* onto Severus' plate. Tapping a fingernail at a small notice in the Births, Deaths & Marriages section, she glared at her husband.

"Are you, or are you not responsible for this?" she asked him.

Severus blinked at the notice proclaiming Mrs. Rose Malfoy's pregnancy. Had Hermione really just asked him if he had slept with Draco's wife?

"I beg your pardon?"

"I know you gave them Amortentia," Hermione hissed. "I still can't believe you made them get married. That was a horrible thing to do, forcing them together like that just to annoy Lucius. It's cruel to play with other people's emotions like that, but to bring innocent children into it as well is just unforgivable. It's sick, Severus!"

She looked genuinely angry with him. More so than just the usual annoyance with his and Lucius' games or irritation when he had accidentally said or done something offensive to her. This was the sort of anger that could turn ugly unless it was cleared up right now. It was just unfortunate that they were sitting at the breakfast table in the Great Hall.

Moving his chair closer to Hermione, he leaned in to keep the conversation as private as possible.

"Yes, I gave them Amortentia, but only once the first time they met in Hogsmeade, and it was a very small dose. I can assure you that any effect of it has worn off by now," he told her firmly, speaking in little more than a whisper. "I didn't force them into anything, and I had nothing to do with their decision to get married. The fact that it annoyed Lucius is merely icing on the cake."

"Well, they do seem to genuinely care for each other," Hermione admitted, and Severus relaxed a bit. The crisis appeared to have been averted, although he felt slightly annoyed that she had suspected it in the first place. It was of little consequence though, since he could see how she had arrived at her conclusion.

"And you absolutely swear that you only gave them any sort of potion that one time?" Hermione asked, pulling him out of his thoughts again.

Oh damn!

He knew he looked guilty when he saw Hermione's eyes narrow dangerously. Strange how he had spent half a lifetime lying successfully to the Dark Lord, yet Hermione read him like an open book without the aid of something so crass as Legilimency. She did have an awful lot of experience with books, perhaps it had rubbed off and created a whole new method of mind reading?

"What did you do?" she hissed at him.

"I might have snuck a little bit of a fertility potion into the champagne at the wedding..." he admitted. It was no use trying to conceal it from her. "But it was only their own bottle."

"I knew it," she said and rolled her eyes. "You really are getting old, Severus."

"Pardon me?"

"We drank from that bottle too," Hermione reminded him, "and you wouldn't happen to recall who proposed the toast in the first place, would you?"

"Oh." Severus suddenly had a suspicion as to where this conversation was going and gave her a small, sheepish smile. "That would have been me, wouldn't it?"

"Remember how you told me that Sebastian would have to be an only child because you were getting too old for nappies and screaming babies?" Hermione asked him sweetly. "Let's just say that you and your potions and your wedding toasts ensured that I got my way after all."

"I see." Severus wasn't sure how he felt about that. A large part of him was absolutely elated and proud of Hermione's pregnancy, but it was difficult to silence the voice that kept telling him that he was too old to be a father. The voice had been there already when Hermione had carried Sebastian under her heart, and it was even more vehement now about how it was unfair to the children to be saddled with a father of his age and how ancient he would be by the time he got to be a grandfather. It made him feel selfish. The fact that Hermione had been a few years younger than the average first-time mother when Sebastian had been born didn't really work to counter it. He knew the issue of his age didn't matter to Hermione and that she was happy with having a second child, even as she scolded him for having spiked the younger Malfoy couple's wedding champagne with fertility potion. Her happiness made it easier to deal with it and ignore his doubts.

"It was about time Draco settled down with a nice witch, anyway," Hermione said, her attention turned back on the notice in the paper, "and Narcissa, at least, certainly seems to be genuinely fond of the girl. I'm sorry I accused you of playing their puppet master."

Severus just nodded his acknowledgement of her apology, ready to forget all about it. Hermione would know what it meant, even if he didn't say anything. He supposed there were some things he would just never learn. At least, she didn't seem to be expecting him to apologise for having been a bit loose with the potions in the first place.

"I can't wait to call Lucius 'Granddad'," Severus said with a smirk. "You know it's going to send him straight to the nearest mirror to search for grey hair and wrinkles."

"Now that Draco's all grown up, at last," Hermione said, tapping her finger on the notice again, "don't you think it's time you two did as well?"

Severus didn't answer her question. He just smirked at her and busied himself with pouring another cup of coffee.

36 years later

"Granddad!" Lucius crowed triumphantly at Severus, as Hermione finished reading the owl from their daughter for him. There was little mistaking the look of smug fulfilment on his face when he said it, as he had been waiting for the opportunity to throw Severus' taunting back in his face for more than thirty years. "Took her long enough."

"Great-granddad!" Severus retorted sourly, already grabbing for his wand. "I'll bet your grandson is slow."

Both of their hexes missed, resulting in scorched spots on the walls behind them. At age 88, Severus' eye-sight had started to decline, and Lucius, being a few years older, was troubled with arthritis. They would still try to hex each other in a good natured manner, but it was a rare occurrence that either of them succeeded. Apart from the marks it left on the walls, Hermione had stopped worrying about it. From the looks of Narcissa calmly sipping her tea, so had she.

Having been conceived almost simultaneously and born only three days apart, Arabella Snape and Lucien Malfoy had been inseparable since infancy. It had been almost expected of them to fall in love and get married, in spite of Severus' insistence that the very thought of it was giving him ulcers. Lucius had, according to Narcissa, expressed similar ideas. Still, nobody had been surprised to see them standing together at Arabella and Lucien's wedding, proud as peacocks, with their arms around each other's shoulders and taking turns in congratulating the other, each salutation followed by more Firewhiskey. It had been one of the very few times Lucius and Severus had forgotten about their constant games to get one up on each other.

Lucius sneered smugly at Severus' missed hex. Apparently, he didn't care that his own hex had been far off the mark, as long as Severus couldn't hit his target.

"I've bought these lovely new satin ribbons to tie you up with later," Hermione whispered in Severus' ear, effectively distracting him from sending another hex at Lucius by aiming in the direction of his cackling, "but I can't do that until the Malfoys go home, and they can't go home if you hex Lucius." After a moment's pause, and a suggestive leer from her husband, she added, "And don't just tell them to sod off. It's not polite."

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