

In Search of a Life

by devsgma

In Search of a Life, which is told from Snape's POV, is a sequel to *In Search of a Wand*. I strongly advise you to read that story first, or this one will leave you completely lost.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

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AN: I've run out of ways to say thank you, Lariope. *In Search of a Life*, which is told from Snape's POV, is a sequel to *In Search of a Wand*. I strongly advise you to read that story first, or this one will leave you completely lost.

The annoying little twit stopped in front of him, wiped her soggy eyes, and had the audacity to glare at him. After the tongue lashing he'd given Granger, Severus was astonished that she had the fortitude to even look in his direction. She pulled something from her pocket, enlarged it, and shoved it into his middle. Then Granger said the most astounding thing he'd ever heard in his entire life.

"Meet your son. If you have any questions, you can owl me in Australia."

She'd long since disappeared by the time Severus closed and re-secured the shop door. He stood there for an unknown amount of time staring at the object she'd thrust into his hand, afraid to open it. If she'd told the truth, it contained froth made from dreams. Froth that would surely fade if he allowed himself to believe, even for an instant, that they were actually within his grasp.

Severus made himself put the album down on the counter of the shop while he finished tidying his lab. All the candles had been doused when his hand reached out in the darkness to touch it again.

It had still been there.

It had remained unopened on a shelf in the spartan flat above the shop until he received a reply from a very discreet former... comrade... who fled to Australia after the Dark Lord's demise. There had been no sleepless nights over Severus' decision to let this former Death Eater escape detection. He'd been brought into Voldemort's fold very late in the game; his allegiance forcibly taken. In exchange, his Muggle-born wife and their children had been allowed to flee the country. Severus had had to caution him more than once over the expression of horror on his face when confronted with the evil that had been their mutual Master.

The missive arrived on a Wednesday morning, and Esther muttered, "Thank Merlin," when Severus informed her he would be in his flat for the remainder of the day. He chose to ignore her comment, which had been a reflection of his mood for the past month, and took the unopened letter with him. The kettle had still been warm; therefore, it wasn't long before Severus sipped a strong cup of tea and contemplated the simple envelope with his name on the exterior.

Severus rose, retrieved the album Granger had left with him and set it beside the envelope on the small dining table. He resumed his seat, folded his hands and stared at

first one object and then the other. As long as the letter remained sealed and the album closed, the possibility existed that she'd told him the truth. The son she'd spoken of could never be the green-eyed, red-haired daughter he'd dreamed of having before Lily had married Potter, but he would still be his child. The impossible child Severus thought he had buried alongside her memory.

The cup's bottom was found, the envelope duly opened, and the letter finally read. It contained the name of a Muggle hospital, a date of birth for one Andrew Matthew Granger, and the current address of his mother, Hermione Granger. It appeared she was living with a Monica and Wendell Wilkins, who had moved to Australia within a month of Dumbledore's funeral.

Clever, Miss Granger. Very clever.

Did you ever know how fervently the Dark Lord searched for your parents after he almost captured you and Potter at Godric's Hollow?

Godric's Hollow on Christmas Eve. London on Boxing Day.

What were you doing there, Miss Granger? Severus silently asked an absent Hermione with a frown on his face. *Surely, a witch of your obvious foresight wouldn't have neglected her contraceptive potion if she'd been out for a mere fling.*

Why were you there?

The parchment held no further answers, only more possibilities. The dates were certainly within the time frame Severus had allotted. He tossed it aside in favor of the album that was drawn closer and opened.

"Hello, Andrew," Severus said quietly as the tiny wrinkled face of a newborn baby greeted him on the first page. "Your hair is quite dark, which leaves Weasley out of the equation. You'll be quite thankful for that in the future, but there's still Potter, isn't there? What color are your eyes, little man?"

Severus searched for older pictures of Andrew and found one near the end that couldn't have been taken too long before Granger's visit. The child had been looking up, straight into the camera, a broad smile of delight on his face... and the eyes weren't green.

"But they're not brown either, are they, Andrew?" he asked while he leaned closer and peered intently into the captured irises. "No, they're not. They're hazel. My mother's eyes were hazel. Your... grandmother... had the most beautiful eyes," Severus told the picture. "They would change shades depending on what she wore. They fascinated me as a child."

The possibility had become a reality. Severus Snape had a son. A son whose mother he'd belittled from the first day she'd become his student. A son whose mother he'd driven from his shop with foul insults and more belittling words.

I'll never see him in the flesh, Severus acknowledged as he turned back to the beginning of the album and studied, not the child, but the relationships portrayed in the Muggle photos. They showed him a mother and grandparents who loved Andrew a great deal. They freely showed him the life of a child who had no need of a father, and the resurrected dream struggled against the cold logic that tried to return it to its tomb.

The battle continued over the next few weeks, logic reigning supreme during the hours Severus labored in his shop. Bitterness would overwhelm him when he realized that the business he'd worked so hard to obtain and improve would never be Andrew's. It wouldn't matter that he'd already had a will drawn up leaving it and Spinner's End to his son. Andrew would grow up, without him, in Australia. Severus, and whatever property he managed to acquire during his lifetime, would mean nothing to the boy. They would be sold, and the proceeds sent to a bank "Down Under."

Evenings found him drawn back to the album to study the face of his son and the people who mattered the most in his young life. Most of all, he pondered what possible motive Granger might have had in mind when she decided to inform him of his progeny. It was quite obvious, from the glimpses she'd thrust into his hands, that she loved Andrew more than Severus thought possible given her reaction when she had discovered who "Hershel" really was.

There are too many missing pieces, he decided one night. *Too many to allow me to let it rest.*

The next day he arranged for a Portkey, informed Esther and Gertrude that he would be taking at least a week's vacation commencing in three days, and wondered, not for the first time, if he was bound on a fool's errand. His contact in Australia, after being assured that he didn't intend to visit, made arrangements for lodging not far from the Wilkins' home.

The few opportunities in which he'd managed to observe their interactions with Andrew only reinforced the impressions he'd obtained from the photos. The child was well looked after, greatly loved by all three adults in the home, and they didn't appear to be lacking the necessary funds to continue to support him.

The fourth day of Severus' visit had come and almost gone when the opportunity he'd been waiting for finally occurred. Granger left her residence alone, on foot, and quite intent on where she was going. She made it all too easy to follow her unobserved, and he scowled at her back. She'd grown too at ease with "peace" in his opinion, but then he mentally shrugged when he realized there probably weren't all that many Dark wizards lurking about either.

Granger's actions on the playground puzzled him further when he observed the copious amount of tears on her face.

Is she ill... perhaps dying? Is that why she made the trip?

Severus discarded that avenue of thought when he reminded himself that her parents were quite capable of rearing Andrew; there would have been no need to contact him. A shaft of pure ice struck and made him gasp when it occurred to Severus that the child could be the one in mortal danger.

Instead of finding neat little particles to fit the growing picture, Severus had found more holes. Holes he was convinced Granger could fill if asked the right questions. It hadn't been easy, but the few he managed to wrest out of the belligerent, stubborn little witch had been a beginning.

Then she did the unexpected again. Granger asked if he wanted to see Andrew. The living, breathing, froth of an almost forgotten hope.

"I would," were the only words his tight throat would allow him to utter.

The frolicking kangaroos displayed on Andrew's bedding and bunting were completely ignored as Severus beheld what he'd long thought impossible. Wild thoughts ran through his mind and he remembered Granger grabbing for an absent wand. *What would it take for me to snatch the small bundle and Apparate away? She wouldn't be able to stop me. We would be gone in an instant. Untraceable.* The railing of the crib creaked slightly under the pressure of his grip, Granger muffled a yawn, and Severus realized he'd been holding his breath.

Am I going insane? Severus asked himself as he retreated from the crib. *Am I no better than... the Dark Lord? To even consider ripping a child my child away from his mother?*

As rude as it was, Severus fled the room and then the house. He needed to put as much distance between himself and the... temptation as quickly as possible until he could regain control. Granger caught up with him before he was able to leave and extended an invitation he couldn't refuse, but there was one last thing he needed to know if he was going to be able to sleep at all that night.

Severus frowned and then asked, "Why were you crying? On the playground."

Hermione ducked her head before shaking it and meeting his eyes again. "It's been a strange evening. One that has taken my emotions from the heights to the depths and back again. I've had to make some decisions, and it's not always easy to reconcile what I want... with what is possible."

I know the feeling well.

"Ah," he said with both eyebrows raised. "You and I may have something besides Andrew in common, after all. Good night, Hermione."

He had lunch with Hermione and her parents the following day, and Severus had been seated almost directly across from his son. The food was eaten, proper responses were offered to conversations, and he even managed to compliment his hostess' cooking. Later, if Severus were asked what he'd eaten, he would have been able to recite the list, but he would have had no real recollection of how it actually tasted.

Severus longed to drink nothing but the reality of the child as he put a coating of mashed peas on his mother's arm. He wanted nothing more than to gorge himself on the peals of childish giggles when Hermione gently admonished him. Severus had been quite concerned that anyone looking at him would realize what had occurred and wouldn't allow himself to openly gaze at his son. The sarcastic bat of the dungeons had fallen hopelessly in love for the second time in his life, and it had taken less than an hour.

Hermione unknowingly threw Severus a life-line when she asked to become his apprentice. It was a fragile one that he reeled in carefully, for he didn't know quite what he would have done if it had shattered. It hadn't, and it was that gossamer thread which made the return trip to England without his son almost bearable.

Wonder of wonders, the whisper of a thread held and drew his son's mother back to England. His heart froze in his chest when Hermione announced she would be living under Potter's roof. Severus, when he'd been released from St. Mungo's, had sworn he would never willingly suffer that particular person's painful presence again, but the oath wilted when the remembered echo of Andrew's laughter touched it.

When Kreacher opened the door of Potter's house, Severus had been prepared for many things, but he hadn't been prepared for Potter's request to call him Harry. The bloody Boy Who Lived had always been the painful reminder of all Severus had thrown away in his hasty youth. The child he and Lily might have had. The dark hair, the green eyes stabbed him anew each time. His actual resemblance to James Potter had been the proverbial salt in the wound that would never heal.

Severus stood on the stairs, raised his chin and looked at the young man who'd just asked him to call him Harry. He waited for the familiar pain to strike, but it never arrived. It took Severus a few moments to understand why. Potter as annoying as he would always be was no longer the reminder of the ghost child he might have had. He'd been replaced by Andrew, who was very, very real.

Severus turned, smirked and said, "Albus led me to understand that all things are possible... in time."

It appears the old bastard was right again.

..~*~..

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

Severus adjusts his life to accommodate Andrew.

AN: Thank you, Lariope, for all your hard work.

Hermione was proving to be a very good brewer, not that Severus would tell her that in so many words, but it had allowed him to take an odd afternoon off now and then that he normally spent with Andrew in the flat above the shop. His child was growing too quickly in Severus' opinion but that didn't stop the process. It only served to make him greedy for more time with his son.

This particular spring afternoon found the wizard at Spinner's End. There was adequate room in his childhood home for himself, Andrew and his mother. He wasn't thinking of proposing marriage by any means, but he needed more room than the flat offered now that he had a son. If he could persuade Hermione to move in with Andrew, it would gain him a great deal more access to Andrew as well.

As he moved from room to room, various memories returned. There were a few that he would classify good, but the greatest majority... weren't. The land in the back of the house was adequate for the small garden his mother had always planted, but it wasn't really large enough for his son to play in. He knew that from first hand experience. It was obvious from the condition of the ceilings in the upstairs bedrooms that the roof would need patching at the very least. The windows needed re-glazing, and the carpets what there were of them were threadbare. Spinner's End was drafty, drab and almost a hovel.

Severus heaved a sigh as he locked and warded the door behind him. Glancing up and down the street, he knew there would be no buyers for this house. The other houses around it were empty and had been since the Dark Lord had fallen.

"If the bloody thing is still standing by then, Andrew will be *thrilled* to inherit it," he grumbled before moving toward the street.

Returning to the flat he currently called "home," Severus sat down at his desk with his accounts ledger. It was abundantly clear that he couldn't afford to buy a different house, but he could probably afford to repair the roof, re-glaze the windows and purchase decent carpets and drapes. "That leaves next to nothing for the furnishings," he muttered as he closed the book, almost but not quite regretting the funds he'd spent to purchase the apothecary.

Remembering the bright, comfortable home Andrew and his mother had enjoyed in Australia, Severus doubted his childhood home would tempt Hermione in the slightest unless he made some major improvements. She was already living rent-free at Grimmauld Place and had the added advantage of having Kreacher there. While he wouldn't call it exactly cheerful, there was plenty of room, and the park across the street relieved it of any need for a yard.

"Think, man," he scolded himself. "There has to be a way to earn or acquire enough to buy some proper furniture short of selling your soul to another Dark Lord."

Three days later, after having sent a request for an appointment to see Lucius and having subsequently being invited for tea, Severus found himself outside the gates of Malfoy Manor at the appointed hour. While he wasn't surprised that the Malfoys would continue to live in the house after all the atrocities that had occurred there during the Dark Lord's occupation it was one of their grander homes and Lucius had always been inordinately proud of it he was surprised at his own reaction to seeing it again. A vision of Charity Burbage being consumed by Nagini sent a chill down his spine before it was shoved firmly to the back of his mind. Severus became aware of his left hand covering the portion of his neck that still carried scars from the brute and hastily removed it. It wouldn't do to give Lucius any sort of advantage in the coming negotiation.

As he approached the boundary of the property, Severus felt familiar wards caress his skin as the gates slowly, gracefully opened to admit him. The long walk up the drive reminded him of other trips and the fallen "comrades" that had, at times, accompanied him. He was extremely content to be alone on this particular trek.

He stopped as one of the many Malfoy elves appeared in front of him and bowed. "Master is being in the red garden gazebo for tea. If Mister Snape is not knowing the way, Splinter is being able to lead."

Severus' eyebrows rose slightly. "Is there more than one gazebo now?"

"Yes, Mister Snape. There is being the yellow garden gazebo, the white garden gazebo and the red garden gazebo. The blue garden is having no gazebo, but Master is promising Mistress that---"

"Just lead me to your infernal Master," Severus snarled after he rolled his eyes.

Walking past the lush grasses, fragrant flowers and bountiful fruit trees of the various Malfoy gardens, Severus was forcefully reminded of the vast differences between his upbringing and Lucius' childhood experiences. They served to underline the unbridgeable abyss between what he could offer Andrew and what Lucius had been able to provide for Draco.

Despair almost overwhelmed him at that point as Severus stopped and stared at the opulent surroundings. Spinner's End would never be an adequate substitution for the home his son had left behind in Australia. He knew that no amount of repairs or refurbishing could turn his pig's ear of a home into a silken web that would tempt Hermione enough to move away from Grimmauld Place.

"Is Mister Snape wishing to use the lavatory?" Splinter asked.

"What? No," he replied before once more following the elf. Severus was tempted to turn on his heel and leave, but pride wouldn't let him. Lucius would probably assume that seeing the grounds where the Dark Lord had ruled had proved to be too much for Severus' psyche, and he couldn't allow that.

The red garden gazebo and Lucius' platinum hair finally came within his line of sight. Dismissing the elf, Severus took his time approaching his old "friend" as this was their first meeting outside St. Mungo's. While Severus wasn't exactly leery of the other wizard's reaction, he kept the handle of his wand in the ready position as he approached.

"Severus, old man," Lucius said as he rose. "I was beginning to think that bloody elf led you to the wrong gazebo."

More than a slight amount of confusion muddled Severus' mind for a moment as he took in the likeness of Lucius Malfoy... smiling at him. Severus stopped as the handle of the wand fell into his hand. He had seen Lucius *smile* on many occasions, but this particular smile wasn't in the other wizard's repertoire that he knew of. It held affection and dare he think it? happiness in the crinkles around the mouth. Crinkles that Lucius would never have allowed to appear on his face. It was a smile more suited to Dumbledore than a Malfoy.

"Lucius?" Severus cursed himself over the tone of his own voice. It held disbelief and a touch of the insecurity he was feeling. If this was someone using Polyjuice, he'd given away the game before it began.

The imposter if that's what he was gentled the smile into an adequate impression of Lucius' well-known smirk. "Lucius Malfoy at your service, Severus. I didn't realize you'd had memory problems during your recovery or I would have properly introduced myself, but you must admit that your request for an appointment was coached in the terms of someone who was already familiar with me."

"Don't be a bigger ass than you already are, Lucius," Severus growled as the wand was returned to its holster. "It was that ruddy great smile that threw me. What did you do, take lessons from Lockhart?" Severus asked as he moved toward the table, grasped the hand Lucius extended in greeting, and chose a seat.

Lucius scowled slightly before saying, "Any other wizard saying those words might be receiving a hex instead of tea." He fell silent for a moment while a elf served them each a steaming cup of tea. "It's your own fault, really." When Severus' eyebrows rose slightly, Lucius waved the elf away and leaned forward. "It is," Lucius insisted angrily before he took one of the delicate cakes on the tray and shoved the whole thing in his mouth.

The complete lack of any genteel manners had Severus wondering if he'd stowed his wand a little too quickly. "Who are you and what have you done with the Lucius we all know and... love?"

Wiping his mouth with a monogrammed linen napkin, Lucius glared at Severus before taking a sip of his tea. "I'm right here, you old bat. It's not my fault your continued absence forced me into a display I'm not accustomed to giving." Lucius picked up another of the little cakes and demolished it in the same manner as its predecessor before pushing the plate in Severus' direction. "Narcissa has me on a blasted diet," he said by way of explanation. "Since she isn't here at the moment, I ordered the elves to provide proper cakes for tea in honor of your visit."

"Ah, I see," Severus advised with a touch of amusement in his voice. He reached forward and removed one of the cakes from the serving platter before taking a generous bite and placing the remainder gently on his saucer. "So it was the anticipation of having a few treats that put that Dumbdorian smile on your face and *not* my longed for presence as you would have me believe."

"Now you're being vicious for no reason," Lucius commented dryly while eyeing the remaining cakes covetously.

Slightly exasperated, Severus pushed the plate back in Lucius' direction. "Oh, do have at them, Lucius." He sighed when the blonde narrowed his eyes. "I'm not about to carry tales to Narcissa that you've gone off your bloody diet."

Scowling again, Lucius reluctantly nudged the plate back in the other man's direction. "You might not, but she'll grill the damned elves, therefore, if I want anything close to a decent dinner this evening, I'll not be having any more."

Severus entertained the notion of scarfing the remainder of the cakes in front of the other man for his own amusement, but reasoned it wouldn't do much for his cause if he did. "Order the elves to box the remainder for me to take with me when I leave. I'll shrink it, slip it to you when they're not looking, and you can enjoy them at your leisure."

A delighted expression crossed Lucius' countenance before it was replaced with a suspicious look. "Why?"

"I'm not about to eat them all," Severus advised before he finished off the cake he had. "I'd have indigestion for a week, and no, it's *not* because they're anything but delicious; I'm not accustomed to such rich fare," he lied with a straight face. Gertrude brought him wonderful little snacks about once a week. The Malfoy cakes didn't compare to her homemade treats, but he wasn't about to let Lucius know or he would probably make Severus share.

Lucius sat back in his chair, crossed an ankle over a knee and sipped his tea. "Now that that's settled to our mutual satisfaction, tell me what drove you to actually see me. I was almost surprised to hear from you after the number of invitations you've refused."

This was an old argument and one that Severus didn't feel the need to start again.

"You're a bit more blunt than you used to be, Lucius. A few years ago you would have waited me out," Severus replied as he, too, put one ankle on a knee. "You know very well why I decline your gracious invitations for a sumptuous evening of wining and dining. I live in a flat that Narcissa wouldn't be caught dead in so I am unable to return your hospitality. I still refuse to be the poor *relation* who comes to dinner once a month."

"We'll agree to disagree on that point, shall we?"

"We shall," Severus stated before taking a rather large drink of his tea. Setting the cup down gently, he raised an eyebrow in Malfoy's direction. "Are you still interested in the collection of antique books left to me by my mother's family?"

Lucius paused in the middle of placing his own cup down, and his eyes narrowed slightly. "If I were, does that mean they're finally for sale?"

"Would I have asked if they weren't?"

Severus winced when the fine china cup entrusted to Lucius' hand clattered onto its saucer.

"Are you mortally ill?" Lucius asked with what Severus noted in surprise was a touch of real concern in his voice.

"Not unless you've fed me some untraceable poison in my tea," Severus replied after sniffing his cup. "What is wrong with you today?"

"Nothing is wrong with *me*, my friend," Lucius assured him. "I have to wonder what has occurred for you to be willing to part with your prized collection after all these years. If it's not an incurable illness of some sort, what is it?"

Severus scowled at the other man and debated the wisdom of trying to lie to him. If he knew Lucius at all, and he did, the man would dig and scour until he found the truth of the matter. "I have a son, and I wish to repair Spinner's End into a proper home for him."

"A *son*?" The astonishment evident in Lucius' tone was reflected in his face. "When... How...?"

"A minor dalliance during the last few months of the Dark Lord's existence," Severus said bluntly. "And before you ask, it's Granger."

A small smirk emerged on Lucius' face. "That would explain the Weasley whelp's hangdog expression every time I have the misfortune of seeing him. His *true love* threw him over for a roll in the sheets with the their former professor. That *has* to sting," Lucius added with a brilliant smile on his face. "Poor lad. How will he *ever* recover from the blow?"

"Careful, Lucius," Severus growled. "I could easily forget to leave the parcel of cakes."

Lucius chuckled and waved a hand in the air. "After such good news, even cakes come in a poor second." The hand stopped in midair, and a horrified expression replaced the gloating one. "You're not considering marrying the Mu Granger, are you?"

Severus snorted and drank from his cup. "I said I had a son, not that I'd become completely addle-headed. We're sharing custody, not a grand love affair."

Lucius nodded and then frowned before tilting his head and sending Severus a calculating look. "I'll agree to purchase your secondhand volumes, at what I assume will be an incredibly inflated price, on one condition."

Snape's head tilted in the opposite direction while one brow rose. "I refuse to try and devise a potion that will allow you to eat as much as you want without gaining any weight, Lucius."

Malfoy rolled his eyes and shook his head. "That thought never crossed my mind." Lucius mused briefly while gently rubbing his chin and nodding. "Although... it could be *extremely* useful and profitable. Think it over before you toss that idea in the rubbish, will you?"

"What's the condition?" Severus growled, sure that it had something to do with attending the many dinner parties the Malfoys seemed to throw every other week and wondering if it would be worth it.

Lucius leaned back in his gleaming white wrought iron chair and smirked. "Nothing that will cause you any pain, my old friend."

Knowing that any further *groveling* for the information would only encourage Malfoy's coyness, Severus sat back in his own chair and picked up another cake. Lucius' eyes narrowed slightly, and he watched as Snape placed it gently on his plate without taking a bite.

"You're no fun any longer, Severus," Lucius stated with a sigh.

"Almost dying tends to curb one's sense of humor," Snape retorted dryly.

"There is that," Lucius said with a nod. "Very well." He snapped his fingers and motioned to an elf to attend him. Leaning over, he whispered something, and the elf immediately scurried off to do whatever it was that his or her master demanded.

"How many of those blasted things do you have now?" Severus asked while pouring himself some more tea.

"Elves? I don't have a clue. Narcissa takes care of keeping track of them and naming any new ones that pop up," Lucius replied with an airy wave of his hand.

The elf returned, bowed and presented Lucius with a rolled up parchment, which he took. "Go," he commanded while making a shooing motion with his hand. "Far, far away."

The elf turned and cast a woe-be-gone expression toward its master before trudging off into another area of the garden.

"That's one of the little buggers that reports my every bite to Narcissa. It'll probably have to iron its hands or some such after it has nothing to report," Lucius grumbled while unrolling the parchment. "I had this drawn up well, when we knew for sure you were going to live," he stated baldly. He handed the item to Severus and then sat back.

Severus took and then skimmed the parchment before shooting Lucius a suspicious glance. "Why would you *want* to purchase Spinner's End? Have you discovered gold under its meager cellar?"

Lucius chuckled once and then sobered. He drew a large breath, raised his arms, placed the elbows on the fragile looking table, clasped his hands and shook his head before dropping both hands to the surface. "What price would you have me put on *my* son's head, Severus?" he asked softly.

Severus sent Lucius a confused look and asked, "What does one have to do with the other?"

"Everything," was the exasperating answer he was given. Lucius rose and walked to the edge of the paved terrace. "All of this," he advised while waving an arm to indicate the whole of the Malfoy estate, "would be worthless and of no value to me if we had lost Draco. You ensured that he survived, and I would gladly *gladly* sign it over to you if I thought you would actually accept it. But you wouldn't, would you?"

"Of course not," Severus stated almost angrily. "What was done or wasn't done---"

"Spare me the speech," Lucius stated wearily, interrupting and sitting down again. "I don't want to hear it. I don't care. I don't *care!*" he repeated louder. "I purchased the rest of the row houses surrounding yours when it was obvious you were going to survive. This," he said while indicating the parchment Severus still held, "is my way of saying thank you for protecting my son. Take it, buy a decent home for you and your son and allow me to tear down that block of monstrosities once and for all."

For the second time in less than a year, Severus Snape was left speechless.

"I... I need time to think," was all he could manage to get out of his mouth.

"What's to think about?" Lucius asked while snatching the agreement out of Severus' hand. "This document is almost painful for me to read, do you realize that? There are *none* of the clauses or twists I normally have put in. It's a straight forward, *vanilla* purchase contract in my butterscotch world of business."

"Butterscotch?"

"Oh, shut it. It sounded better than saying chocolate."

"You could have said butterbrickle. It has those crunchy little toffee bits and tastes quite good on a certain type of cake."

"Are you going to sell me the blasted place or not?"

"I would be a fool not to."

"That's never stopped you before. Hey! Don't do that! You said Oh, for pity's sake Here! Take that, you black-hearted scoundrel!"

Splinter slowly scratched his head and pondered the strangeness of his master and his master's guest as they completely ruined the cakes his master had demanded by throwing them at each other. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to report the bizarre event to his mistress.

~*~

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

Idiots and dunderheads abound! Wait, perhaps this should go under warnings?

AN: Thank you, Lariope! You're still the best beta in the world.

"Mister Smothersmith, are you listening to me?" Severus asked tersely.

"Of course, Mister Snape, I always listen closely to my clients," the smug little wizard replied as they exited yet another property for sale. He turned, re-warded the doors, and pulled a list from his pocket. "Now, if you'll put your hand on my shoulder, we can Apparate to the next house directly from here."

"No."

"It would save us a great deal of time, Mister Snape. I understand some people don't like to do Side-Alongs, but it really *is* quite safe," Mister Smothersmith advised with a placating smile on his face.

"No."

"Very well," the shorter man said with a world weary sigh. "If you'll meet me back at my office I can..."

"No," was the terse interruption.

"No?" Smothersmith asked in astonishment and then enlightenment dawned. "You're tired and wish to stop looking for today?"

"You're a larger dunderhead than I initially took you for, you imbecile, if you think for *one tiny* moment that I would entrust my safety to your dubious intellect," Snape growled. "Let me explain it to you in simple words so even *you* won't misunderstand. I not only wish to stop, I *am* stopping. Period. I won't be returning to your office. *Ever*."

Panic graced the features of the other man for a moment, and he almost made the mistake of grabbing Severus' arm, but remembered in time exactly whose arm it was. "But, sir! We can't stop. Mister Malfoy was quite specific in his instructions that I help you find a home."

Severus gazed around the opulent grounds of the current property he was supposed to be considering and barely managed to maintain his temper. Turning his head back toward the estate agent, Severus made sure the older man was looking directly at him when he spoke. "Mister *Malfoy* might want and be able to purchase this monstrous estate. *I do not*. Furthermore, my patience with you...and your listings...has come to an end, Mister Smothersmith. It's obvious you either don't have anything that will suit, or you're under the mistaken impression my pockets are as endless as Malfoy's. I'll find what I need on my own."

With a snap of his robes, and a final snarl sent in the direction of the latest dunderhead he was being forced to deal with, Severus turned and left the ignorant sod standing on the seemingly endless green lawn.

"Hermione!" he bellowed as he walked back into the apothecary. Absently, he noted that Ester was sporting a beaming smile and made a mental note to check how much he was actually paying her, as he was of the opinion she looked far too happy to be a proper clerk.

"Here!" Hermione yelled back and stuck her head out of the workroom door. "What's the catastrophe?" she asked while back peddling in order to keep from being run over as Severus strode into the room.

"Idiots! The world is *full* of idiots! Everywhere you look, everywhere you turn, there's another blooming idiot! Stifle one and three more will spring up in his place," he growled while slamming the workroom door behind him. Stalking over to the coat rack, he pulled off his traveling cloak and flung it on the top peg. Turning around, he glared at his assistant. "How far behind are we on the Clarkson order?"

Hermione's mouth lifted in a small smirk. "We're not. They've already been shipped."

Both of Snape's brows rose, and in a tone of voice that suggested she'd lied, asked, "You've managed to brew and decant all those potions in less than three days?"

"No," Hermione replied and shrugged before explaining further. "From their previous orders, I approximated when and how much they'd be ordering, and when there was time, I brewed them."

Most of Severus' sour mood from dealing with Smothersmith vanished in the light of her foresightedness, but since he wasn't one to bestow accolades unreservedly, he questioned her further. "How close was your approximation?"

"I was off by a case of Wit-Sharpening Potion, but they'd increased their order," Hermione stated calmly.

After glancing toward the door that led to the shop floor, Severus tilted his head and asked, "Why is it that you're doing part of Ester's job?"

Hermione flushed, sat down on a lab stool and fiddled with a stirring rod before she met Severus' eyes. "I... well, she doesn't seem to be keeping up, so rather than have to race to catch-up, I copied the old orders and took them home with me. I worked out a spreadsheet with all the customers so we wouldn't be caught flat-footed again," she said while pulling open a drawer next to her and then frowning. "That's odd, I thought I put it back."

"And you were going to tell me this when?" he inquired with a raised brow.

The stirring rod was carefully laid down on the work bench before she replied. "I wasn't. Ester hates me as it is, so I didn't want to give her any more incentive."

"Is that so?" Severus removed his jacket and hung it up before taking the stool opposite Hermione's. "Why are you under the impression that she dislikes you?"

Hermione barked out a laugh and shook her head. "You've *got* to be joking. You haven't noticed?"

"If it were obvious, would I be wasting my time by asking?"

"No, I don't suppose you would," Hermione stated and then covered her face with both hands before emitting a small, "Ack!" Her hands were lowered and she slid off the stool. "We're going to need some tea if we're going to address the subject of Ester," she said firmly before moving toward the newly installed kitchenette off the side of the lab. Severus wouldn't allow any food or drink in the lab, and while Hermione fully agreed with this for safety reasons, she had persuaded him to add the convenience when she pointed out how much time they wasted going back and forth to his flat when they needed a break.

She was busy finding his favorite chocolate biscuits when he finally joined her. They kept the kettle going while they were in the lab, so it only took a few moments before there were cups of tea steaming away at their usual places. Hermione sat down, pushed his packet of biscuits toward him, and lifted her cup to sniff before taking a small sip. "Why is it that your tea tastes so much better than mine?"

A corner of Snape's mouth lifted in a smirk before he brushed his finger against the bottom of his nose. "I have better olfactory senses than you, of course. There has to be *some* compensation for having a nose this large."

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "Now if I said something like that, you'd sulk for a week."

"I do *not* sulk," he stated while poking his chin in the air. "I merely refuse to converse from time to time." His hand reached out and stroked the packet containing one of his secret vices. "I take it this *discussion* we're about to have about Ester isn't going to go well?"

Hermione squirmed on her seat for a moment and offered a weak smile. "It never hurts to be prepared."

"Out with it," he commanded before taking a sip of tea and sliding a few biscuits out of the box. After eating three, and half emptying his cup, he folded both arms and settled back in the chair. "I'm as ready as I'm likely to be, Hermione. No more stalling. What is the problem between you and Ester?"

Meeting his eyes, Hermione winced and stated, "You are."

"Me?" he asked in genuine astonishment while both of his brows rose. "You're mistaken," he added while shaking his head. "I treat her no differently than before."

"That might be the problem," Hermione said with a frown.

"Why would there be a problem with the status quo?" he asked with a frown of his own. "Make sense, Hermione."

Shooting him an exasperated look, Hermione said, "I was hoping to avoid this, but I guess I'm going to have to spell it out, aren't I?" She sighed, sent him a glare and stated, "She fancies you, Severus."

Keeping his mouth shut when confronted with truths he hadn't before realized had saved Severus' skin on many occasions. His cup of tea was finished while he rolled Hermione's words around in his head, checking them against bits and pieces of his past interactions with Ester. His eyes had narrowed and flicked back and forth between Hermione and the door to the front of the shop before he was ready to make a comment.

"It's possible, I suppose, but why would that influence Ester's feelings toward you?" he asked with a raised brow.

"Good gods, Severus!" Hermione exclaimed while throwing her hands in the air. "I'm the mother of your son, and we spend all day working in the lab together. When we're not working in the lab, half the time we're with Andrew."

Unused to being the top of a *love* triangle, Severus grudgingly had to admit that Hermione's words made perfect sense. Rather than admit it outright, he rose and headed toward the front of the shop.

Hermione blinked and scrambled to her feet in an effort to follow him. "Severus? Whatever you have in mind, *please* don't make it worse!"

He turned and sent Hermione a smirk. "I don't intend to make it worse. I'm merely going to remedy the situation." Drawing his face into a emotionless mask, Severus stuck his head out onto the shop and glanced around for Ester. "Ester, I'd like a word with you in my office." Turning back toward Hermione he instructed, "Watch the shop floor for a bit while Ester and I have a chat."

He waited, quite patiently, for Ester to return from her visit to the loo and join him in his office. Trying to keep a blank expression was difficult in the face of the overpowering scent of whatever perfume Ester had decided to douse herself with, but Severus managed. After the door was closed and Ester was finally seated across the desk from him, he moved forward and placed both forearms and hands flat on the surface. It was an old trick he'd learned from the ultimate puppet master, Dumbledore. Pretend to be at ease and open with the current subject of your interrogation, and at the very least, it served to make them relax their guard.

Severus hadn't quite known how he wanted to begin their *discussion*, but he had used the time Ester took to fluff out her skirts and settle one long leg over the other to his advantage. *If*, as Hermione had stated, Ester fancied him, she wasn't doing anything to disprove the statement. The hastily applied scent, and the elaborate shifting in the chair to expose that long leg to his gaze certainly implied that she was attempting to gain his interest. Almost opening his mouth to ask the woman what she'd actually been doing to earn the wages he paid, Severus noticed an exited gleam in Ester's eyes and held his tongue, merely lifting his eyebrows in anticipation of what she might say.

"I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you in private," she gushed.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I've so much to tell you that shouldn't be overheard by our customers."

"And what might that be?" he asked in a deceptively quiet tone while tilting his head to the side. If Ester had been an observant witch, she might have noticed the slight narrowing of the eyes he hadn't been able to stop. He opened them fully again and gazed at her in a fashion that he hoped portrayed intense interest.

"It's that section of trinkets and other *frippery* that Hermione persuaded you to start selling, not to mention moving *everything* around. *All* of our most loyal customers think it's a waste of precious space that could be used to display more of your *marvelous* potions," Ester stated glibly, unaware that Severus knew exactly how much more profit had been brought into the store as a result of people taking time to really look at what was offered instead of grabbing what they needed and leaving. "As it is, I have to restock the shelves twice as often as I did before. Why, Mister Dejanstone complained to no end when he had to wait for a few minutes while I fetched him a bottle of his favorite liver restorative," she added with a pronounced nodding of her head, as if that should be enough for Severus to rethink the profitable line of items he'd started stocking.

"Is that so?" he questioned gently.

"Oh, yes. I really think we should put the stock back where it was so people don't waste time looking around for their favorites and get rid of all those foolish side items," Ester added with a wrinkle of her nose. "I mean, honestly, if people want scented candles or a quick little gift for someone they can find them somewhere else."

"I shall consider it," Severus advised with a small smirk.

"Oh, and I almost forgot," Ester said with a beaming smile as she pulled a folded bit of parchment out of her pocket. Rising from her chair, she unfolded the parchment and spread it out on Severus' desk, turning it around so he could see it. "I've thought up a new way to predict how much our outside orders will be. As you can see, I've color coded them on this little chart so that all you have to do is follow the customer's name to the potion to tell how much and when they ordered the last time, if it increased at all from the previous order, and if the time between was any longer or shorter. It should make it a lot easier to predict how much of each potion you'll need to keep on hand to fill them when the time comes," Ester stated while leaning over and giving Severus ample opportunity to ogle her bountiful bosom on display. "I think it will ensure that Hermione doesn't mess up any more orders like she did the Hawthorne one a few months ago," she said with a heavy sigh. "I can't tell you how many owls I had to send in order to soothe *those* ruffled feathers."

Keeping his hands flat on the desk when all he wanted to do was strangle the stupid twit in front of him was difficult. Deciding that he deserved an award of some sort for the act he was preparing to deliver, Severus forced the edges of his mouth into a smirk. Picking up the parchment that he *knew* was Hermione's missing spreadsheet, he remarked, "This must have taken you quite some time to compile. However did you manage to find the time with all that restocking you had to do?"

Ester sent a brilliant smile in his direction after finally straightening up. "I'd do anything it took to make your life easier, Severus."

Enough was enough. Severus stood as well and finally allowed his disgust to show on his face. "Then tell me, *dear* Ester, why you've stolen this *spreadsheet*...not merely a chart, mind you...from Miss Granger and attempted to pass it off as your own work?"

Shock and outrage appeared on Ester's face before she shook her head. "She's lying! I worked for hours and hours on that sheetspread!"

Folding and pocketing the parchment, Severus sneered and shook his head. "When I asked you in here I was merely going to take you to task for not fulfilling all of your duties. Your obvious delusions about what is good for business, and the outright *theft* of another's brilliance and hard work has changed my mind. Your services are no longer required in my apothecary, Miss Spellworthy."

The screech of pain and rage that came out of Ester's mouth made Hermione, who was in the distant part of the shop, jump in surprise. Ultimately, as she was being escorted from the premises by a pair of Aurors, Miss Spellworthy had turned her anger in Hermione's direction. Fortunately, Hermione was quite unable to get the full benefit due to the Muffling Spell one of the Aurors had placed on her former coworker's mouth.

After quiet once again reigned in the shop, Hermione turned her head and found Severus, who was unsuccessfully trying to stop the ringing noise in his head. "There's this old saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions that I've love to discuss with you some time."

Severus smirked and put his fingers back in both ears before jiggling them around. "I can't hear a damned thing you're saying, Hermione. I think she broke my bloody drums."

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Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

Lucius stirs the pot.

AN: Many kisses to my wonderful beta, Lariope.

In the weeks that followed, there were a few repercussions from Ester's firing, but in his usual poker-faced manner, Severus coped with the Ministry buffoons who were sent to investigate the claims that his potions weren't what they were supposed to be. It had gotten to the point that Miss Anderson, the person in charge of that particular department, merely owed for a sample of the current potion under attack instead of wasting all their time with a full-blown investigation.

"Honestly, you'd think Ester would show a little originality in her accusations," Severus remarked dryly while looking over the newest *violation*. "This is the third time the user's hair has fallen out. She could at least *try* to make it entertaining."

Hermione, however, was of a different frame of mind. After the fourth *anonymous* complaint to the shop owner about the assistant who couldn't keep her hands off the male customers, she was ready to make sure Ester's hair had help in falling out. Skeeter's article, published just a few days prior, insinuating that Hermione had used blackmail

to get her position at Severus' shop hadn't helped. There were small details in the article that only someone who had been *in* the shop would have known.

"I'll gladly give her a few new ideas to use if you'd like," Hermione offered darkly as she pounded the pestle she was using into its mortar.

Severus would have been lying to himself if he hadn't admitted...in the dark, shadowy recesses of his own ego...that he was enjoying the stench of Ester's disappointment. To have a witch...a beautiful witch at that...go to those lengths because she fancied him was quite a heady experience. The bat of the dungeons, the greasy git, *Snivellus* himself, actually had a beautiful witch who was panting for him. It couldn't get much better in his opinion.

His only regret was that he couldn't rub a few Gryffindor noses in it as he did in the idle daydreams he allowed himself while tending a routine potion. In those, James Potter and Sirius Black, with an occasional cameo by Lupin, wore gobsmacked expressions as he strolled by with Ester on his arm. Potter would preen, Black would toss his hair, and Lupin would look completely pitiful, but Ester would ignore them all and concentrate on Severus. Even Lily wasn't spared the humiliation of being thrown over. She would beg and plead, but Ester would win every time, and he would watch with a small satisfied smirk as Lily shuffled her way back to Potter. It was quite refreshing to be alive and in charge of his own destiny.

"Did you hear what I said?" Hermione asked for the second time.

Coming back to the present, Severus lifted his brows and shook his head before turning it in her direction. "Actually, no, I didn't. I was contemplating what to get Andrew for his upcoming birthday," he lied easily. "What would you suggest?"

Hermione rolled her eyes before starting to pack away the ground scarab beetles she'd been readying for the next batch of Wit-Sharpening Potion. "He's going to be *two*, Severus. He'll be happy with anything as long as it's wrapped in a lot of bright paper that can be torn off and scattered all over the floor."

The chime indicating a customer had entered the shop filled the workroom. Hermione sighed, took off her work apron, and started walking toward the door when it opened and Lucius Malfoy stepped through. The expression on her face was frozen for a moment before she flashed a tight smile and said, "I was just on my way into the shop if there's something you need, Mister Malfoy."

"While I've no doubt that there are *numerous* things I require, Miss Granger, in this *particular* instance only your employer will do," Lucius advised with a gentle smile of his own. "Please, don't let me interrupt your work. Continue on as if I'm not here."

"What do you want, Lucius?" Severus growled quietly while checking his potion for the proper consistency. He didn't care for the way Lucius watched his lab assistant don her apron, nor the way the smile lingered on those aristocratic lips. It wasn't predatory in the slightest, and it made Severus uneasy.

"You've refused my offers of tea and dinner several times over the last few weeks, Severus," Lucius stated as he removed his traveling cloak and flung it over a vacant lab stool.

"I've been extremely busy. We're short-staffed at the moment, in case you hadn't noticed," Severus shot back as he removed the cauldron from the flame and stirred in the last ingredient.

"Be that as it may, we need to talk. I decided, rather than send another invitation that would be tossed back in my face, to chase you to ground," Lucius replied as he moved closer to the other man. "You're renegeing on our agreement."

"I am *not*," Severus said indignantly.

"Mister Smothersmith informs me you have dismissed his services. Does he lie?" Lucius questioned. He proceeded to dust off another stool and then took a seat across from where Severus toiled.

"I refuse to be saddled with an ignorant twit who doesn't know his arse from a hole in the ground," Severus stated quietly with a sideways glance toward Hermione. He rather hoped that she was concentrating on her beetles and not listening to their conversation.

"Strange, he's always managed to locate exactly what I require," Lucius purred while reaching over to pick up a packet of daisy roots. "These are quite nice. It's rather difficult to find them this fresh in the fall."

Snatching the roots out of Lucius' hand, Severus stowed them in the lower cooling cupboard before straightening up and raising a brow. "What you *require* and what I can afford exist on two different planes, Lucius."

"Ah, there is that, I suppose," Lucius remarked with a slight frown before he twisted around on the stool and asked, "Miss Granger, what are your thoughts on the matter?"

"She doesn't have any thoughts on the *matter*, Lucius," Snape hissed in warning as Hermione's head turned in their direction.

"Oh, come now," the blonde-haired wizard stated as he slid off the stool. "Surely she has an interest in what type of..."

"No, she doesn't," Severus growled while glaring at the other man.

A wicked little smirk grew on Lucius' face while Severus' glare increased. "I'm quite sure that Miss Granger knows her arse from a hole in the ground, Severus. It could be the perfect solution to our little dilemma."

"I can find what I need without anyone's assistance."

Lucius snorted and rolled his eyes. "If I left it entirely up to you, you'd find another hidey-hole instead of a home."

"Lucius, I'm warning you!" Severus said in desperation.

"What are you going to do, Severus, toss another cake in my direction?" Lucius asked with an elegant lift of his chin before he lowered it...and his tone...adding, "That reminds me, I should thank you for that vulgar display. Narcissa and I had quite an *interesting* time when she decided to help me bathe."

"You can thank me by dropping the topic and *leaving*," Severus hissed before placing a Cooling Charm on the potion and pulling out several fresh vials for the bottling.

Lucius raised a wicked brow and stated, "I said I *should* thank you, not that I was going to."

Severus watched with no small degree of frustration as the other wizard approached Hermione. Smugness edged the frustration over when he noted that the expression on the witch's face wasn't exactly welcoming.

"Haven't you better things to do with your time than annoy my employees, Lucius?" Severus asked, making one last effort.

Tilting his head to one side, Lucius narrowed his eyes and then nodded. "You do have a point, old man. It would be rather rude to discuss what I want to discuss with Miss Granger while she's supposed to be working."

Severus breathed a small sigh of relief and had just finished bottling the last of the potion when Lucius added, "The obvious solution is to invite your both to lunch; my treat, of course."

Glancing at the clock, Severus stated, "It's too early."

"Nonsense," Lucius said while gesturing with his hands. "You've just finished with that lot, and Miss Granger has pulverized the last of... whatever it was she was pulverizing. The timing is perfect."

"That's quite all right, Mister Malfoy," Hermione tossed out. "You and Severus can go, and I'll stay here and mind the shop."

"That will *never* do, Miss Granger," Lucius said and shook his head. "I'm sure you'll want to be a part of the conversation. After all, it concerns Andrew," he added in a gentle tone while sending Severus a gloating look.

"*What* concerns Andrew?" Hermione asked sharply, sending a questioning glance in the same direction.

Shooting Lucius a murderous glare, Severus tossed the lab cloth down and walked toward the other two. "Lucius is referring to the house I intend to buy, Hermione, nothing more."

"You're buying a house?" she asked in amazement.

"If I ever find one that will suit," Severus stated dryly.

"That's where you come in, Miss Granger," Lucius purred. "You can assist Severus in the search for the perfect abode."

"*Miss Granger* has enough demands on her time," Severus growled, purposely ignoring Hermione's delighted expression.

"I'm sure she'd make the time," Lucius shot back.

Severus folded his arms and stated, "It's not necessary."

"It's *vital*," Lucius replied with narrowed eyes.

Hermione slapped a hand down on the work bench, and once she was sure both wizards were looking at her, stated, "Excuse *me*, gentlemen, but I'm right here and can speak for myself!" Meeting Snape's eyes, she smiled and said, "Severus, I'd be delighted to help you find a house."

Lucius turned, picked up his cloak, and wagged a finger in Snape's direction. "There'll be no undue pressure because she's your employee, correct?"

Hermione glanced at Severus and answered, "Correct."

"Excellent," Lucius said and then whipped the cloak around his shoulders. "I'll leave you to it, then, shall I?"

"That will be the proverbial cold day in hell," Severus muttered as he moved back toward the cooled potion to finish the bottling process. As soon as the other wizard had left the work room, Severus mentally braced himself to be on the receiving end of what he was sure would be an endless stream of questions. When they weren't immediately forthcoming, he sighed, turned his head, and raised a brow in Hermione's direction. What he found was his assistant busily measuring powder into small packets and paying no attention at all to him. "Are you ill?"

Hermione looked up with a slightly puzzled expression on her face. "I'm fine," she said softly before returning to the packaging of the ground scarab beetles.

"*Something* is decidedly *not* fine, so out with it," Severus demanded.

"I *said* I'm *fine*," Hermione returned with an edge in her voice.

"I disagree," he stated with a slightly raised brow.

"Good on you!" Hermione shouted before tossing the last of the packets of ground scarab beetles into the basket on her table. "Is this the point at which I'm supposed to get all snivelly and whinge and cry and beg for your forgiveness?"

Slightly taken aback, Severus asked, "Whatever are you on about?"

Tearing off her apron and throwing it on a stool, Hermione approached him and poked him in the chest with a finger. "I've learned another dark and terrible secret about your private life, and I need to be put in my place, correct? Even though that dark and terrible secret affects my son, I'm supposed to be a good little girl and not interfere or even question *where*, correct?"

She spun on her heel and headed for the small kitchen off the workroom, grumbling all the way. "I'm not supposed to have an opinion on what kind of neighborhood he'll be in when he's with you, if there's adequate ventilation in his room, or even what color the damned thing will be. Are there stairs he could tumble down? What kind of fastenings are there on the cupboards so he can't get into the knives? No, there's nothing I should be concerned about, is there? Severus Snape, dastardly Master of Potions, can make all the decisions by himself that he likes, but I'll tell you *this*, Severus," Hermione spat as she turned at the kitchen door and wagged a finger in his direction. "I *will* inspect whatever house you decide to buy, and if it doesn't measure up, you'll be damned lucky to get a glimpse of Andrew ever again!"

With that, she disappeared into the kitchen, and Severus heard bangs and the mutterings of what he once had thought was quite a sensible woman. He pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "I knew this day started out all too rosy. I should have seen it coming the second Lucius walked in the damned door." He waited, quite patiently, for the bangs and mutterings to cease before he approached the door and looked around the corner. "If I enter, might we have a civilized *discussion* on the topic with no more yelling or finger poking?"

Hermione, from her seat at the table, glared at him before she set down the cup of tea she'd been drinking. "I don't know, can we? I'm not the one keeping such deep dark secrets."

Rolling his eyes, Severus walked into the kitchen and helped himself to a cup of the tea she'd made. He was quite thankful to see that nothing had been broken during her assault on the tea things but hesitated slightly when it came time to take a sip of the brew itself. Taking the first sip was easier when he reasoned that she'd taken nothing into the kitchen to dose it with. After sitting down opposite her, he raised a brow.

"Would it help if I apologized?" he asked.

"For what?" Hermione growled and took an angry sip out of her cup. "Your private life is *your* private life, and I have no interest in it. The fact that you've apparently told Lucius freaking *Malfoy* all about your plans that include *my* son, and *not* me, shouldn't bother me at all, now should it?"

"Apparently it does," Snape replied with a narrowing of his eyes. "I'm not accustomed to letting all and sundry know about my plans, Hermione, Malfoy included. Perhaps I should have informed you that I was considering acquiring a different house, but the only reason that Lucius is aware of *any* of this is because his purchase of Spinner's End is what is making it possible."

"Oh," she said before she flushed and took a slightly calmer sip of tea. "I'm sorry I lost my temper." She fiddled with a few biscuits on a plate before picking one up and

nibbling on a corner. "I'm also a little jealous," she admitted.

"Jealous?"

"Yes, you're buying a house for you and Andrew, and I'd love to be able to do that," she said with a sad smile. "That's not going to happen for me for a long time. Who knows, Andrew might be grown and gone before I can afford to even look at houses."

"I thought you were content at Potter's, with Kreacher and the park across the way."

Hermione shrugged and offered the plate of biscuits to Severus. "It's all right, and I don't know how I'd manage without Kreacher's help, but Harry and Ginny are planning their wedding, and I don't want to be the gooseberry who hangs around after her welcome's been worn out, you know?"

Severus nodded his head slowly and said, "I can understand that, but what will you do? Look for a flat?"

"That's probably where we'll end up. I don't want to touch my Oh, my!" Hermione's eyes had widened, and she suddenly grinned. "Unless... have you considered buying a flat house?"

Severus sent her a slightly puzzled look and stated, "I don't think there's any other kind is there? At least I've never seen a round one. I think they'd be slightly impractical."

"No, I mean a two flat or a three flat, maybe a four flat if you want *a lot* of income from it," she stated excitedly. "I have a bit of money from an inheritance that I could, maybe, perhaps rent one of the flats from you?" Hermione chewed her bottom lip while she studied Snape's face. "Are you in shock? Angry?"

"No, actually it sounds like a rather brilliant idea," Severus admitted before taking a bite out of another biscuit. "Where are you going?" he asked when she beamed and jumped up from the table.

"I'm going to pop out and get a Muggle paper to see what's listed for sale," she stated while grabbing her purse. "Then we can look over what's being offered and make some appointments to go see them."

"You don't have to have an estate agent take you round?" he asked.

"Not for the initial picking," Hermione stated while heading for the door. "This will give us an idea of what the market is like and what we want before we set foot in one of their offices. It'll give us an advantage."

"Advantages are good," Severus said to her quickly disappearing back. "Rather cheeky on her part, not even asking if she could leave in the middle of a work day," he muttered almost good-naturedly to the remaining portion of the biscuit before he popped it into his mouth.

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Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 5

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

AN: My undying thanks to my wonderful beta, Lariope.

Severus stood alongside Hermione at Platform 9 and 3/4 and wondered where the years had gone. The Hogwarts Express was preparing to steal his son away, and he didn't know if he would be able to survive the ache in his heart that had been growing steadily larger.

Every purchase they'd made in Diagon Alley had drawn this moment closer, and Severus had found himself wishing for a Time-Turner. He'd missed the first year of Andrew's life, and while he no longer held any ire towards Hermione for those absent memories, Severus wanted that year back, and he wanted it now. Unfortunately, this particular wish...like the majority of others he'd had during his life...didn't come true.

All too soon, the train left the station, and Severus watched Hermione wipe the tears off her face. "I still say we could have continued to train him at home," he said stiffly after swallowing the large lump in his throat.

It was an old argument between the two of them, and Hermione sighed as she shook her head. "Andy needs more than us, Severus. He needs to make more friends, have fun, and play Quidditch if he wants." Hermione's voice had wavered slightly, but it steadied as she added, "Hogwarts can give him all that along with the education he needs."

Severus snorted. "He has the whole of the Weasley and Potter spawn as friends; how many more does he need?"

Hermione turned a watery smile toward him and said, "As much as I *d*love to stand here and have one of our snappy little arguments, I have to report to work. I'm going out for dinner this evening, so you're on your own."

As they turned to exit the platform he asked, "Dinner with Miranda, again?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, Miranda is otherwise engaged this evening."

"Who, then?"

Snape wasn't quite sure, but he thought Hermione's face took on a bit of a flush before she said, "If you must know, Dennis over in Acquisitions. It might cheer me up to have dinner and possibly take in a movie."

Being stopped dead in his tracks reminded Severus of the time he'd followed her from the park in Australia, when she'd dropped the bombshell that she hadn't told her parents anything about the father of her child. "You're... going on a *date*?" he asked with an incredulous note in his voice.

Hermione turned to face him with a lightly raised brow. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"What about all the folderol you've spouted over the years about the possible psychological damage to Andrew if he gets attached to some wizard and it doesn't work out?" he asked with a touch of outrage.

"Andy is eleven years old now," Hermione said as she took a few steps back in his direction. "He's going to be spending most of his time at Hogwarts." She dropped her eyes to her hands, which were twisting the strap of her purse, before she finally met his gaze again. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone, Severus," she added in a soft tone. "Now, I really must get to work."

Severus watched in stunned silence as she turned and walked in the direction of Diagon Alley. After a few moments he followed in her footsteps. Once in the alley, he glanced in the direction of Gringotts, where even now *Dennis* could be greeting her.

When Hermione had settled on Arithmancy as her chosen calling, he'd been content to have her apprentice with Septima Vector. When it led to a job offer at Gringotts, Severus had been instrumental in obtaining a fair contract for her, without Hermione having to repay a third of the damages done during the great dragon escape. It had been underhanded...and completely unfair to the Goblins...but what good was having a friend like Lucius Malfoy if you couldn't use his influence now and then? The mere threat that Malfoy would withdraw all his money was enough to have the Goblins forgive the entire debt. Lucius' price had been minor in comparison, and Severus was very close to perfecting the potion that would allow his old friend to eat as many little cakes as he desired and only gain a few ounces. There were only a few nasty little side effects that were proving quite stubborn.

Severus wore a scowl when he turned away from the view of the bank and strode toward his apothecary. He couldn't, and wouldn't, change any of that, but he was damned if he'd let some dunderhead named *Dennis* break up his family. For the second time in less than ten minutes, Snape braked to a halt. "Bloody hell," he whispered to himself and turned to look at the bank again. With the threat of other wizards in the equation, Severus was being forced to acknowledge that Andrew wasn't the only person he loved.

Instead of being euphoric, this infuriated him to a degree he hadn't felt in years. The door of his shop suffered a crack in its frame after he slammed it shut. Stephan, the current daytime clerk, jumped, hastily grabbed a fragile vial that threatened to roll toward the floor and asked, "Is something the matter, Mister Snape?"

"No, nothing is wrong that a bit of clear-headed thinking won't cure," he growled. "I'm going upstairs. Catastrophes only, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Stephan said and went back to stocking the shelves.

Stomping his way upstairs, Severus shoved open the door to his old flat. Hermione had suggested he rent it out after he'd purchased the two-flat they currently lived in, but there were times when he needed the solitude and the freedom to pace. And pace he did. He also kicked an empty box that lay in his path, taking great pleasure in the task after visualizing it being the arse of a wizard named Dennis. When the box had been completely destroyed, he walked to one of the front windows, opened it, leaned out, and found Gringotts.

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone, Severus," he mimicked in as high a voice as his deep tones could manage. "She's got Andrew, me, her parents, her bloody *best friends*, and any number of acquaintances that visit at all hours of the day and night when she's home, so how in the bloody, blue blazes could she consider herself alone?" he thundered into the crisp morning air.

Glancing down, he noticed an open-mouth matron gazing up at him in surprise. "Hasn't anyone ever told you it's very *rude* to listen to private conversations?" Severus said with a sneer in his voice as well as on his face before he slammed the window shut.

He turned away from the window and braced his back against the wall. Slowly, he slid down until he was sitting on the dusty wooden floor. He liked the way his life had turned out, and while Severus realized *exactly* what Hermione was saying, it threatened to disturb the status quo. "Bloody, bugging hell," he muttered after dropping his head back against the wall and tapping it a few times. "She can't; it'll ruin *everything*."

Severus' anger slowly ebbed away and was replaced with melancholy. He knew he'd never be able to stomach living next door to Hermione if she married another wizard. Rising from the floor, Severus dusted off the seat of his trousers and started meandering through the flat. He was checking for any damage, trying to decide if it would do once more, or if he should start somewhere else fresh when he happened to open a closet door. It was partly filled with shrunken boxes, and he didn't remember putting them there.

After unshrinking a few, Severus' brows knitted together over what he found. They contained Andrew's baby things, clothing included, that he'd thought Hermione had disposed of over the years. "Why would she keep these? Does she want another child?" A horrified look crossed his face. "With...with *Dennis*?" Quickly re-shrinking the boxes and stuffing them back in the closet, Severus strode from the flat and back down to his office in the shop where he scratched out a hasty note to see if Lucius could spare him an hour.

If a Malfoy were to pout...which they most assuredly didn't...Lucius' countenance would have passed muster. "Are you positive you've tried all the different varieties of the shrivelfig? There *is* that new one that Longbottom presented last month at the Herbologists' Conference."

Severus raised an eyebrow in Malfoy's direction and said, "If you'd like to spend the majority of your day in the loo after taking a dose made with Longbottom's shrivelfig, I'll whip you up a batch immediately."

Lucius wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "But the shrivelfig does counter the... whatever it was that was causing the other difficulties?"

Severus rolled his eyes and nodded. "It does. The amount and where it needs to be added in the brewing process has yet to be determined."

"How soon do you anticipate having it perfected?" Lucius asked eagerly.

Severus...who had been waiting for just such an opening...said, "Normally, approximately a month to run all the steps and test the results, but something happened this morning that requires my immediate attention, and I have no idea when I'll be able to get back to experimental brewing." He sighed melodramatically and took a sip of tea.

Lucius' eyes narrowed slightly, and...being well versed in the Slytherin world of give and take...nodded. "Would I, in any capacity, be able to assist you with the happenings of this morning to free up your time?"

Severus briefly considered continuing the charade, but decided the hours were ticking by too quickly. "A Gringotts employee, by the name of *Dennis*, in Acquisitions needs to be banished to a branch that's not within easy Apparating distance before this evening."

Lucius' eyebrows lifted in a faint show of surprise. Whether it was over the quickly given answer or the request was unknown. "Banished or eliminated?"

Severus wrestled with his conscience for a moment and relented. "Banished...under the guise of a promotion and raise...but he has to be en route to the new location before close of business today."

Lucius rose and walked to the back of his study and sat down at the desk that had its back to the glass doors. Drawing a piece of magically enhanced parchment that was reserved for business transactions from a drawer, he quickly scratched out a few paragraphs. He paused and brushed the tip of the quill over his lips. An inquiring look was sent in Severus' direction and he asked, "Might this *Dennis* person have a surname, in the event there is more than one in Acquisitions?"

A scowl crossed Severus' face before he rose and walked to the front of Malfoy's desk. Leaning down, he placed both hands on the desk and stated, "He'll be the *twit* that

has a daan appointment with Hermione Granger this evening."

A small smirk lifted the corner of Lucius' mouth as he returned to penning the letter to Gringotts Chief Goblin. "It's about bloody time," he muttered.

Severus straightened and glared at Lucius. "It's about bloody time for *what*?"

After sealing the letter with a glob of the special wax and seal he always used so the recipient would know in all certainty that the directive was actually from him, Lucius summoned an elf and directed it to deliver the missive. Leaning back in his chair, Lucius folded his hands across his still flat stomach and sent a lazy smile in Severus' direction. "Tell me, old friend, are you anticipating the nuptials to take place around Christmas? If you are, you'd best arrange to use one of those wedding planners that are in such vogue now-a-days. They take care of all the endless *boring* details that go on behind the scenes."

An almost gobsmacked expression flittered over Snape's face before he drew his brows together in a frown. "I dislike jests at my expense, Lucius."

"I'm not jesting," Lucius replied. "When Narcissa was organizing Draco's wedding, she vowed she never would have survived if it wasn't for... Helen? No, I think it was Hannah," he said with a slight frown, and then he shrugged before adding, "It might have been Heloise. I'm sure Narcissa still has her information and would be more than happy to contact her for you."

Lucius rose, crossed the room, and opened the drinks cupboard. "I know it's a bit early in the day, but we must have a small celebration. Let me see... brandy, isn't it?" he asked and then picked out two snifters. "I think you'll enjoy this one. My father put away a number of cases almost seventy-five years ago, and it's aged very, very well," Lucius said as he poured a good measure into each glass. Turning he held one out to Severus. "Come, come, old man. After all, it's not every day I wait upon you hand and foot."

Slowly, as if sensing a trap, Severus drew closer to Malfoy and took the proffered snifter. He rolled the liquid around in the bottom heavy glass before taking a delicate sniff. "I'm not quite sure you know what you're blathering on about, but far be it from me to refuse such an exquisite example."

Malfoy's chin dropped a trifle while one of his eyebrows rose. "I may impart information, structure inquires in pursuit of the same, and occasionally indulge in harmless gossip with my wife, but I *never* blather, Severus." He turned, drew two cigars from the humidor that sat just inside the cabinet, and motioned for the other wizard to follow him to the outside terrace where a table and two chairs waited. "This brandy deserves an equally good cigar, but Narcissa does fuss about the smell that manages to permeate every corner."

After they had smoked a third of the cigars and consumed half of the brandy in silence, Lucius angled his head in Severus' direction. "If it's not going to be around the holidays, when will it be? I must make sure my schedule is clear so Narcissa and I can attend." Lucius blinked and then leaned forward with a look of horror on his face. "You're not going to go before a magistrate or be foolish enough to elope are you?"

Severus pursed his lips and then opened them to take a sip from his glass. "There isn't going to be a wedding of *any* kind, Lucius."

Lucius looked taken aback for a moment, and then frowned. "Have you left it too long, then, and she's fallen out of love with you?"

"We *are* talking about the same witch...Hermione Granger...not that Spellworthy person I fired ages ago, correct?" Severus questioned.

"Who's Spellworthy? Some tart you kept on the side? No wonder the poor girl's thrown you over. You should wait at least five years *after* the wedding to even contemplate having an affair, let alone flaunt it in the woman's face. At least that's what my grandfather always advised. I've never been tempted," Lucius advised with a smug expression on his face. He drew on his cigar and contemplated the remaining length before blowing the smoke into the air. A small snort had his attention being pulled back in Severus' direction, and he admitted, "Or brave enough to face Narcissa's wrath."

"And you're back to blathering," Severus muttered.

Lucius sent a slightly puzzled look toward Severus. "You *honestly* don't know? My word, you don't, do you?" Leaving his cigar in the silver tray on the table, Lucius rose and stroked his chin. "The master *spy* who's so unaware of what goes on around him that he tosses the love of a good woman away." He turned and faced his guest again, still stroking his chin. "Perhaps you're too close to the situation to have grasped all the nuances. Yes... that makes sense."

"I wish *something* at some point in your dissertation would!" Severus snarled. "You're telling me that Hermione Granger is in love with me? What did she do, confess it to one of her friends, and it made the gossip circuit to Narcissa and finally to you?"

"Not to my knowledge, old man," Lucius stated before he took his seat and his cigar again. After taking a small sip of brandy he added, "I came to this conclusion after watching her watch you all these years."

"She... she watches me?" Severus asked.

"About as much as you do her when she's not looking," Lucius said.

"That much?"

"At least."

Severus rose, finished off his brandy, and snuffed out the cigar. "I need to make some arrangements, Lucius. Thank you for your assistance."

A smug Lucius watched his old friend disappear into the depths of the house. He was positive Severus was hurrying home, and while he would have loved to have been the proverbial fly on the wall, he wasn't quite as positive he wanted to be in the way of Hermione's rage when she found out what had happened to Dennis in Acquisitions.

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AN: I'm going to address this issue now, because I know there will be those of you that *want* to see the nine years I've skipped over. In my head, those nine years were extremely busy years, but a bit boring to read (and write) about. Hermione and Severus, more concerned about giving Andrew a stable home life than anything else, didn't date other witches or wizards, so there are no jealous scenes or horrific disagreements.

Their home is an ordinary two-flat, which made it extremely easy for both of them to have quality parenting time with Andrew. After the first few weeks, Hermione and Severus made it a habit for all three of them to have dinner together in the evening.

Hermione decided on Arithmancy, apprenticed with Vector at Hogwarts, and still managed to make it home to Andrew every evening. Kreacher still minded Andrew, even when the Potter spawn started showing up, as Harry and Ginny (who decided to stay home with her brood) were glad to have him pop over to Hermione's home as it kept him busy and happy. Severus hired another assistant, not as capable as Hermione (which he would never admit, of course), and the apothecary continues to flourish.