

From Mother to Daughter: Severus

by septentrion

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One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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oOo

Severus stared at the bare shelves around him. For the last time, he was in his house at Spinner's End. He'd sold the old and dilapidated building at a good price to the town council, which intended to build a park to make the town more attractive to newcomers. Not that Severus cared. With the money he'd received from the transaction, he'd bought a *wizarding* house in Hogsmeade.

He hissed when he turned his neck a bit too fast. The wound at his throat was still sore, but the staff at St Mungo's had really worked miracles in his case. Two months after the dreadful day when the Dark Lord tried to kill him, he was alive and moving around, and the Dark Lord was not...in spite of his Horcruxes.

A knock at the door put a stop to his reminiscing. When Severus opened the door, Percy Weasley stood there, as solemn as ever, if a bit pale.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Weasley. Come in, but I'm afraid I'll have to receive you standing. My furniture has already been sent to my new home."

"Oh. I wasn't aware you were moving." Weasley shuffled into the empty lounge. "The Minister wished to come himself, but was detained by a Floo call from the French Minister."

Severus didn't doubt the reason Weasley gave him. Kingsley Shacklebolt wasn't the kind of man to hide behind excuses.

"We have a, er, situation," Percy stuttered.

Severus crossed his arms and kept his face impassive, even though he could see where this was going: he was going to be asked to clean up some mess.

"You know Hermione Granger?" Percy didn't wait for an answer. "She wiped her parents' memory last year and sent them to Australia. She went to retrieve them last month with Harry, Ron, and Bill. She wanted Bill to lift the Memory Charm she'd cast on them. The problem is, when Bill tried to do it, her father died. Her mother was brought to St Mungo's, but now no one is willing to try and restore her memory. They say only a very good Legilimens can do it."

Annoyance mixed with anger rose in Severus. The circumstances surrounding the death of Hermione Granger's father had made the *Prophet's* headlines. "So the Minister thought that he'd ask a tainted man to do the deed to be able to wash his hands of any mess afterwards?" His voice was quiet, but Percy, as a former student of Severus, knew to be wary of that tone.

"No, it's not like that. Actually, Hermione's father suffered from an aneurysm that was triggered when Bill tried to lift the Memory Charm. But people are afraid of killing, or even just hurting, a war heroine's relative."

"If I understand what you're saying correctly, you're telling me that restoring the memories of Miss Granger's mother would be safe, but no one wants to do it?"

Percy swallowed visibly and nodded.

"What do I get out of it?"

"You'll do it?"

"Yes, but at a price."

"The Minister thought you might. He said, 'Any price, or nearly.'"

"I'll let the Minister know what my price is myself. Now, if you don't mind, Mister Weasley, I must go."

"Of course."

"Goodbye, Mister Snape." In his eagerness to return to the Minister and Hermione with the good news, Percy tripped over the threshold.

"Goodbye, Mister Weasley."

As soon as the redhead had Apparated away, Severus smirked. At long last he would get his hands on that old book on the Dark Arts the Ministry was hiding in the Department of Mysteries in exchange for a bit of spell work any apprentice Healer should be able to perform.

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The woman was introduced to him as Monica Wilkins. She was a bit thin, probably a result of all the stress she'd been suffering from, but fierce. She was scared, but she faced him bravely. Except for the hair, Miss Granger didn't look like her mother, but he could already guess that the girl got her finest Gryffindor qualities from her.

"I'm told you're going to 'help' me." She was standing near her bed, dressed in a hospital gown, her arms crossed, her eyes defiant. Her hair was the only touch of colour in the bare, white room.

"Good day, Mrs Wilkins," Severus answered. He closed the door behind him, leaving a very nervous Miss Granger in the corridor.

"Isn't a Healer, as they say here, supposed to supervise the procedure?" she countered.

"If they didn't feel competent enough to implement this procedure, they're not competent enough to supervise it."

Her lips curled upwards, barely. "Well, I'm more than ready to have this circus over and done with." A shadow crossed her face. "It's cost me enough, already."

"I agree. Would you sit on one of those chairs?" Severus gestured to a pair of black-cushioned chairs. He arranged them face to face.

"The procedure was explained to you, wasn't it?" She nodded.

When they were seated, he raised his wand and muttered, "*Legilimens*."

He was confronted at once with a burst of memories, all of them less than one year old judging by the environment in which they took place. He also noticed the absence of Miss Granger from most of them. In a matter of seconds, he'd determined that Monica Wilkins...she insisted on the name, he was told, steadfastly refusing to be called "Mrs Granger"...was a woman with strong feelings but a very rational mind, able to rein in her emotions if necessary. In his book, that made her a very admirable woman. A pity her daughter didn't take after her; she would have been a formidable witch.

He searched through her mind for anything, a thread, a hidden door, a safe, or whatever hid her memories from her conscious mind. After a while, he found them, cleverly concealed behind the false memory of a desert landscape. He snorted. Only a very experienced Healer would have found them. Maybe he had underestimated this job, after all. Or Miss Granger's abilities.

Mindful of Monica being a Muggle, he decided to stop his exploration for the day. He took note of the path leading to the hidden memories and withdrew from her mind. He'd come back later. As it was, she was clutching her head between her two hands.

"Damn, that hurts!" she reproached him. "Can't you magical people keep that painless with all the power you have?"

"Magic isn't a panacea," he explained quietly, though her reaction irritated him. She should be grateful for his willingness to help her...even if it had resulted from a fee the Ministry had agreed to pay.

"Don't I know it," she muttered. She raised her eyes and lowered her hands slowly, as if testing if she could stand the pain without holding her head. She breathed deeply. Determination not to show weakness shone in her eyes. Faced with that gesture, Severus was strongly reminded of her daughter. "Thank you for helping me," she said sincerely.

"Ah..." After everything she'd been subjected to because of magic, Severus didn't expect gratitude. He was so accustomed to the contrary, he didn't quite know what to say, so he changed the subject. "I'll be back in two days. It wouldn't be prudent to... repeat the procedure too often."

"Am I at risk of losing more of my mind if you rummage through my head too often?"

"You might lose the memories of your life in Australia. And your sanity."

Monica looked resigned, though reluctantly. "All right. But do I have to stay at the hospital? Can't the 'procedure' take place in my home, since I'm told I have a home in England?"

Severus barely managed to bite back a smirk. Like mother, like daughter, always contesting decisions made with their welfare in mind. "The Healers don't want to take any risk concerning your recovery. The Ministry would have their heads. So you'll have to stay under their care."

"I thought so."

The Granger women didn't like feeling helpless, Severus reflected. It was a good trait to possess.

He stood. "I have to go now. I wish you a good day."

"Thanks." She got up, too. She raised her hand as if to shake his, but thought better of it and let it fall again.

Severus let himself out. Miss Granger rushed past him as soon as he cleared the door. He heard, "How are you..." before the door closed behind him. Since it was the first time her mother had been subjected to Legilimency, he thought he wouldn't hold Miss Granger's rudeness against her.

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Every two days, Severus came back for Legilimency sessions with Monica Wilkins. For a Muggle, her mind was rather resistant to Legilimency. He had to...figuratively speaking...cross the desert her mind had conjured before he could reach her real memories. It was a very complex desert with oases, mirages, caravans, and bandits. Several times, he felt like he was dying from dehydration. Several times, he nearly got lost in the sea of dunes. But he stubbornly persevered in exploring Monica's mind.

In the fortnight he had known her, Miss Granger's mother had become Monica. Being intimate with someone's mind tended to make such barriers crumble. Moreover, Monica was as stubborn as he was when it came to recovering her memories. "I will have them back," she'd declared to him in a tone that left no doubt about her determination.

After another week of making his way through Monica's mind, the first real memories emerged. She remembered holding a tiny, wrinkled baby while lying in a hospital bed. Miss Granger's birth. The girl was a really ugly baby, but the strength of Monica's love took Severus' breath away. She was no different from Narcissa Malfoy on that account.

When he withdrew from her mind, tears were running down her face. "Thank you," she said, unable to say more.

"Think nothing of it," he automatically replied. Damn, he could never resist a woman's tears. More specifically, he could never resist a mother's tears. He had to leave before he did something stupid. Again. "I'll be back in two days." He got up and dashed through the door.

Monica was so caught up in her recovered motherhood that she barely noticed his escape.

As usual, Miss Granger was waiting for his departure in the corridor. This time, though, she stepped in front of him instead of rushing to her mother's side. She was biting her lip, a sure sign that she wanted to tell him something embarrassing or perhaps confess some sin to him.

"Please, sir, do you have a minute?"

"You'll take it, anyway. If not now, then later," he bit back.

She cast her eyes down, still biting her lip. She breathed loudly and raised her eyes to his. "I wanted to thank you for everything you're doing for my mother. I know you don't have to, so it's very nice of you." She paused briefly. "I also wanted to apologise to you for not checking if you were still alive in the Shrieking Shack."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I'm really sorry. I should have seen that..."

Enough. "Yes, you should have. But you were preoccupied by the fight against the Dark Lord."

For a brief second, she let his words sink in. "Am I forgiven?" she asked, hopeful.

"No."

Her face fell. Tears would soon follow.

"Perhaps one day," was all he could offer to her guilty conscience. "Have a good day," he said coolly before walking away.

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After that first breakthrough, Monica's memories came back to her quickly. It was as if they were just waiting to be unlocked, to the point Severus had to space his visits.

When school started on September the first, he was only free to visit her on Saturdays. As Hogwarts' Headmaster, he couldn't leave the school too often. However, he was most reluctant to see his time with the Muggle woman come to an end. Even though he had more or less been forgiven by the school teachers for his role in the war, he, for his part, couldn't forget how quickly they had been ready to believe the worst of him, how they had never really trusted him even before he had to kill Dumbledore. Except for Lupin, but the werewolf was dead.

With Monica he had the opportunity to start a friendship free of any expectations. She knew him as he was, warts and all, and showed him she appreciated his company. Her knowledge of the wizarding world made it easy to be himself around her. Saturday afternoons with Monica had become a necessary breath of air in his life, and it seemed the same was true for her.

In that fashion, time passed...a reassuring routine of work, amicable enough relations with the other teachers, Saturday afternoons with a genuine friend, and Sundays with a good book in front of the fire (the castle tended to be chilly even in summer). For the first time in his adult life, Severus thought of himself as content. Even the students were behaving, as far as teenagers could. His only reason to worry was, unexpectedly, Miss Granger. Of course, as a friend's daughter, he probably kept a more careful eye on her than on others. But he wondered why the once outgoing and enthusiastic young girl was acting rather withdrawn.

"Severus, how is Hermione doing?" Monica asked him in November.

He hesitated. What to tell her? "Why? Are you worried about her?"

"Don't dodge the question, please. Of course I'm worried. Or I wouldn't have asked!"

Trust Monica to get to the point. What a nice change from his past friends and masters.

He fiddled with his cup of tea. Finally, he looked her in the eyes. "She's withdrawn. She's not without friends, but they're not really *her* friends."

"What about Ginny Weasley?"

"They're close, but Miss Weasley is living on the cloud of her romance with Potter. The others... I don't think she feels she can confide in them. I imagine that after a year on the run, being nearly killed several times,...he purposely left out the part about torture..."being an ordinary student again can't be easy."

"That's what I was afraid of. Her letters are almost too cheerful to be credible. And when I see her, her smiles are forced." Sorrow filled Monica's eyes.

"I'll keep an eye on her."

Hope. "You will?"

He nodded solemnly. "I promise."

She grabbed his hand. "Thank you. It means so much to me."

"You realise, though, that I won't be able to do more than watch her? I can't interfere in the students' lives. *Not anymore.*"

"I know. But I'll be better able to help her if I have an inkling of what's going on in her life." Monica gulped. "She won't confide in me." Her voice was shaking. She turned her head in a poor attempt to conceal her tears.

Merlin help him. He'd never been able to resist a mother's tears, and apparently that hadn't changed.

"I know she modified our memories and sent us away," she resumed in a barely steadier voice. "She did it to save our lives, but that act of hers still keeps us apart. Yet, she's my daughter. Nothing could ever change that."

This time it was Severus who squeezed her hand. "Believe me, I understand."

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On Christmas day at noon, Severus knocked at Monica's door. She had invited him a fortnight ago, when he'd reluctantly admitted that he had neither family nor close friends with whom to celebrate the holiday. Even the Malfoys, though technically still his friends, had elected to spend this Christmas only with close family.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation," Monica said when she opened the door.

"I assure you the pleasure is mine, Monica."

When Monica took his cloak to hang it on the hat stand, he heard a shuffle of feet near the doorway leading to the living room. He looked up. Miss Granger was hovering there, clearly unsure of what to do with herself. He frowned. She'd better not make Christmas lunch an awkward affair.

"Come in," Monica interrupted the uncomfortable scene. "The meal is almost ready."

He followed her into the living room. In a corner stood a small Christmas tree almost buried under an enormous quantity of ornaments. In the middle of the room, the large table was set for three. Unlike the tree, it was uncluttered.

"Would you like something to drink?" Miss Granger asked.

"If you have some whisky, I'd like some."

"Of course, Headmaster." She dashed to prepare his drink. The girl was probably anxious to get away from him.

Gifts were exchanged after they'd all had a sip of their drink of choice...port for Miss Granger and vodka and tonic for Monica. In Severus' opinion, Miss Granger's gifts were rather impersonal. She'd bought a book about perfumes for her mother and a book about Maghrebi herbs for him. Still, he was glad his gift had nothing to do with the war.

Monica's gift to him on the other hand was very personal. He was very pleased with the black silk scarf she'd got him. She knew he could barely tolerate ordinary fabric coming in contact with his scar. Unlike most clothing, the silk scarf snuggled against his damaged skin without chafing. It felt marvellous.

When the women opened the gifts he'd brought them, they turned teary-eyed at matching red scarves, gloves, and hats. He wanted his gift to symbolise the closeness they had as mother and daughter, even if they had lost it for the time being. Monica was a good mother and a good friend. She deserved to get her daughter back. It wasn't his place to try and broach the subject with her daughter, so instead he had opted for a symbol. By the way they reacted, they got the message. What he didn't expect was the sheer gratefulness in their eyes. He returned Monica's heartfelt hug. He suspected he'd barely escaped a hug from his friend's daughter as well.

Thankfully, the rest of the day was uneventful. Miss Granger still looked uncomfortable in his presence, but conversation never became stilted. When Severus left them, he felt more content than he had in ages.

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On the first Saturday of January, Severus asked if Monica would be agreeable to accompany him the next week to a cosy Muggle restaurant he'd noticed. Of course, their weekly meeting would be rescheduled to the evening.

"Why, that sounds like a romantic date," a beaming Monica teased Severus.

He took a breath like a man on the verge of diving from a great height into a deep pool. "It is."

In spite of his nervousness, Severus was fairly confident about Monica's answer. He'd been thinking of asking her out for a month now, and since Christmas, he'd felt that both Monica's and his feelings for each other had become deeper. Not exactly love...he knew what romantic love was, therefore he knew this wasn't it...but unconditional trust and friendship, the like of which he'd observed between Potter (father and son) and his friends.

"I would love to."

The sincerity in her smile and eyes convinced him that she was ready to take that step, that the hold her grief had on her wasn't as tight as it had been. He would make sure she had a good time with him, so that she'd agree to their friendship turning into something more.

Severus had considered his relationship with Monica carefully. After a lot of pondering, he'd come to the conclusion that she was all he could realistically hope for a companion: she knew what he was, so he wouldn't have to lie to her; she wasn't clingy, still living, herself, with the memory of a lost love; she wouldn't require passion on his part, nor would she drown him with it. He couldn't imagine expecting any more from life.

"Thank you, Monica." He squeezed her hand lightly. "You know we'll have to tell your daughter, though?"

A small wrinkle appeared between her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. As you know, Hermione has been rather withdrawn since school started. Most of her friends have left school. Those who are still there don't seem to be as close to her as they used to be... I don't think it would be a good thing to keep our relationship a secret from her. She must feel she can trust you. You're the only constant in her life right now."

Grateful tears brimmed up in Monica's eyes. "That's very thoughtful of you. Hermione and I... We're not as close as I'd like us to be. I hope this won't separate us any more than we already are."

"Tell your daughter. I trust her to understand, even if she might need time to come to terms with our relationship. I also trust her to remain discreet. Not that I want to keep us a secret, but I don't wish for any of us to be assaulted by wizarding reporters."

"We don't need that, indeed." A pause. "I'll write to her this week. I'll have to take the plunge one day or another, anyway." She tried to joke.

Severus answered her with a small smile and a light kiss on the tips of her fingers. Then they spent the rest of the afternoon chatting and drinking tea until it was time for Severus to go back to Hogwarts.

oOo

Miss Granger's vacant expression and glassy eyes as she held her letter informed Severus that Monica had broken the news of her dating him to her daughter. He nearly snorted aloud at her astonished face. Did all teenagers think that one's love life was over at twenty-five? No, not Miss Granger. She was mature enough to consider that romantic involvement was possible for people of all ages. She was probably more shocked at her mother moving on, and with her Headmaster at that. Well, he'd know more about her state of mind after the outing with her and her mother on Saturday evening.

However, before he left the Great Hall to face the day, he noticed that Miss Weasley wouldn't look in his direction. It could only mean that, as he had anticipated, Miss Granger had kept quiet about whom her mother was involved with.

On Saturday evening, Severus made his way to the Muggle restaurant to meet Monica and her daughter. He spied the two women waiting for him in front of the establishment. The older woman seemed lost in her thoughts while the younger was nervously rolling on the balls of her feet.

"Good evening," he said when he was closer. His voice startled them. Monica smiled warmly at him while her daughter cast him a cautious but curious look. That bode well for the evening. He stepped aside to let them enter the restaurant before him. Ever the gentleman, he held out their chairs. The way they both took their seat, with a little smile of thanks and sincere warmth in their eyes, was so similar that he couldn't help smiling at them in turn.

"How was your week? No one turned into a toad?" Monica asked without any awkward preamble. That was one of the things Severus appreciated in the woman: as a dentist, she was used to making people feel at ease, and her talent was coming in handy that night.

"Quiet enough," Severus answered. And since the evening was about Hermione...if he called her "Hermione" in his mind, it helped to dissociate her from her student persona...getting to know him better, he turned to her. "Or what do you think, Miss Granger?" He wasn't ready to call her "Hermione" to her face, though. Maybe in time...

Visibly unprepared for being addressed, Hermione reddened and stammered. "Er, right, yes, I agree." Her embarrassment was amusing. Severus hadn't seen her that put out since... better not to think about the past now.

However, her mother came to her rescue. "My week was rather quiet, too." Then she managed to turn the conversation to dentistry and medicine of all things. He noticed after a while that Hermione seemed uninterested. That would not do. He'd promised Monica to do his best to get her daughter to relax around him. He decided to use humour. Since his friend enjoyed his particular brand of humour, he hoped her daughter would appreciate it, as well.

"And having a rat's nest in lieu of hair is a trait that runs in your family," he retorted to Monica's teasing about his teeth.

His tactics failed. Or he'd touched a particularly sore spot: Hermione's face hardened. He didn't expect her daring reply, though. "I believe you appreciate it well enough." Her eyes travelled significantly from her mother to him.

That... that disrespectful hussy! If they were at school, he'd deduct one hundred points from Gryffindor! What was she implying about her mother and him? Severus felt heat rising in him. He was probably flushing with anger.

She didn't back down. Her eyes flashed with defiance.

Severus forced himself to breathe deeply. He wasn't at school, scolding a misbehaving first year. He was having dinner with a friend and her daughter. And he had to admit, the young woman had a lot of allure in her defiance. Monica was never defiant. Angry sometimes, but never that bold. He wondered if Hermione had inherited that trait from her father. In any case, without her uniform to remind him of her status, with those wild tendrils of hair escaping her attempt at a chignon, and the indignation blazing in her eyes, she shed all vestiges of girl and student in his eyes; only a woman was left. In that new light, Severus felt something he'd never expected: respect. Hermione Granger had stood her ground to him as a woman and gained his respect in the process.

The young woman recognised his expression for what it was. A smile graced her lips, acknowledging what had just occurred. Then the conversation resumed as if nothing had happened, but with Hermione as an active participant this time. For one brief moment in the evening, Severus even allowed himself to think he was having *fun*. Mother and daughter were formidable conversationalists when they overcame their inhibitions, though the know-it-all streak of the daughter regularly showed up. When their meal came to its end, Severus didn't want to go back to his empty lodgings. Being alone was becoming less and less palatable with time, but he didn't see what he could do about it. He walked the two women back to their car, and after they'd exchanged their goodbyes...a nod to Hermione, and a kiss on Monica's cheek...he Apparated back to Hogwarts gates.

The next day, Sunday, Severus decided to have as leisurely a day as he could while staying in the castle. After he'd made sure no emergencies awaited him in his office, he enjoyed a decadent breakfast in the Great Hall, then decided to go and fetch some light reading from the library. He noticed at once the three girls huddled over one of the heavy wooden tables: Miss Lovegood, Miss Weasley, and Miss Granger. The first two were probably trying to console the third one, if Miss Granger's red eyes and tears were any indication. Severus was unsettled. The previous evening had been a success, hadn't it? Whatever mental breakdown Miss Granger was suffering, he had to get to the bottom of it. To nip it in the bud. Now. His relationship with Monica might depend upon it.

"Miss Granger!" he called her sharply, but without venom in his voice. "Come with me!"

The young woman raised her head, and her chin. In spite of her blotched appearance, she defied him once more with the expression in her eyes. "Yes, sir." That was better. Severus let his appreciation show in the controlled softening of his demeanour. Miss Granger nearly smiled back.

They walked in silence to his office, under the watchful eyes of the portraits. The clanging of his boots' heels and the soft sound of Miss Granger's Muggle shoes were the only sound to accompany them along the stony corridors of the castle.

Once in his office, he invited her to sit in front of his desk. Only then did it occur to him that maybe he should have had offered her a seat in one of the armchairs near the fire-place. Some habits were hard to break...

He searched for his words for a brief time. "Miss Granger, I'd like to talk to you about my... relationship with your mother."

She nodded, her anxiety making her head bob a bit too forcefully.

"Quite unexpectedly," he carried on, "I have found a friend in her. A closer friend than I have had in a long time. I have the utmost respect for her, and for you."

He gauged her reaction from the look on her face, which she was trying to keep blank. She wasn't very successful.

"I'll never be a hindrance on your relationship with her. You have my word on it." Better be blunt with her and give her as much reassurance as he could.

After her surprise at his words faded, she spoke slowly, as if she was still processing what he had told her. "All right." She breathed deeply. "I'll never be a hindrance on your relationship, either, as long as she's happy."

Somehow, Severus had expected that reaction. She was Monica's daughter through and through. "Thank you."

Abruptly, she asked, "Is that all?" She seemed eager to escape now. He guessed she wanted to be alone to come to terms with the situation.

"You can go, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

She rushed out of the office as if she were fleeing a demon. Concerned, Severus wondered if their conversation had gone as well as he'd thought.

oOo

The following weeks, Severus kept an eye on Miss Granger from a distance. He couldn't interfere in her life due to their respective positions, but he did pay attention to her potential distress. He was much relieved to notice none. She seemed to endeavour being cheerful, or at least not gloomy. His bet that Hermione dealt better with the truth than with secrecy or lies had paid off. She even made an effort to get to know him better by regularly crossing his path in the corridors and engaging him in short conversations and small talk. He didn't particularly encourage her, but he nevertheless appreciated her trying.

In the meantime, his relationship with Monica was progressing. They were now exchanging regular correspondence in addition to their weekly meetings. She'd been delighted and grateful for his reaching out to Hermione, and she'd made him the best chocolate cake he'd ever eaten in thanks.

"I've seen so little of Hermione since she went to Hogwarts. I didn't know half of what you've told me."

He was surprised. "Didn't she write to you about her life?"

"Yes, she did, even the gruesome details...like that tournament some years ago. But she never really delved into the 'Dark Lord situation'."

"She didn't want to worry you."

Monica looked pained. "I know. There wasn't much Wendell or I could have done, so there was no point in worrying us, I guess. But... not to be part of those aspects of my daughter's life hurts a lot."

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"I... I've tried." She paused to search for her words. "After you told me about her being tortured, I broached the subject with her. She tried to shrug it off, to make nothing of it." She let out a strangled sob. "It was as if she were the parent and I the child, and she wanted to protect me from the evil of her world." Another sob. "It should be the other way around." Several sobs.

Severus squeezed her hand. "I think I understand," he said softly. "But whether you could have done anything about it is irrelevant. You showed her that you care. I am convinced that matters to her most. I know that if my father had shown me only half the care you show Hermione, things would have been different for me."

Hope peeked through the tears in her eyes. "You think so?"

"I know so." A broad smile lit her face, and he was nearly blinded by the brightness of her expression...an expression he had caused to appear.

A short time after that conversation, Severus wondered if he had reason to revise his opinion of Monica being the parent when she asked him to go out on Sunday rather than Saturday evening because Sunday was Valentine's Day. He found the holiday rather childish, but he didn't have it in him to chide her for it. It would hurt her feelings, so he decided to indulge her. They met in front of the restaurant.

"Indian?" he asked.

"You like curry." That was reason enough.

They were led to a rather secluded and dimly lit table. The atmosphere was rather intimate, and Severus found that it didn't bother him. After the customary exchange on how their week had gone, they delved into more personal subjects while savouring their respective choices of curry...lamb curry for Severus and vegetable curry for Monica.

"I really enjoy seeing you, you know," Monica said idly, as if it were news. Severus waited for what she actually wanted to say. "Wendell and I didn't have a lot of friends, and none of them were close friends. We distanced ourselves from people, or we'd have had to lie about Hermione and the wizarding world. Neither of us was very good at deception. There were so many potential questions we couldn't answer..."

That Severus understood only too well. He nodded to convey his feelings.

"When she sent us to Australia, we lost contact with everyone. I managed to reacquaint myself with a couple of our friends, but it's not the same. Things have changed too much. / have changed too much." A pause. She looked him straight in the eye, with an intensity that should have unnerved him. "You're the only significant friend I have, Severus. Our relationship is important to me. I want to see where it leads us. I'm not expecting passion or the great love of my life, but the companionship I've found with you is nice. I'd hate to lose it."

For all that she wasn't a witch, Monica was a true Gryffindor at heart. She was honest to a fault. Obviously, she'd anticipated his possible falling in love with her and wanted to warn him that should that happen, his feelings wouldn't be reciprocated. Well, he was going to put her fears at rest.

"I know, Monica. I've loved the same woman for years, even after her death. I don't expect to fall in love ever again. But having a companion who knows, really knows me, makes life more agreeable. A lot more."

She grabbed his hand, and he let her. He hadn't felt so understood for a long time. He'd thought that Dumbledore did, but he'd soon realised that the old man had used his perceptiveness to manipulate him. Severus couldn't even hold it against the old headmaster because he knew that he'd have done the same, had he been in Dumbledore's shoes. And at least Dumbledore had manipulated people with consideration and manners, unlike his "master". But here was a woman who just wanted the pleasure of his company. He was more than inclined to grant her her wish.

When their meal came to an end, Monica insisted on paying since she was the one to insist on the Valentine's Day outing. Severus agreed, not because of the money but because he admired determination and independence in a woman...qualities his mother certainly hadn't possessed.

"What would you like to do now?" he asked once they were outside.

She considered his question for a short time. "Let's go for a walk," she suggested.

"Certainly. Where would you like to go?"

"London. Let's just go where our feet lead us."

He Apparated both of them to a quiet corner of Muggle London. They strolled leisurely, hand in hand, not paying much attention to where they were going. Their conversation rolled freely, interspersed with comfortable silences. From time to time, Monica looked at him as if she didn't expect him to be there, but they had a great time before their feet reminded them they needed to rest, and Severus Apparated them both to Monica's doorstep again.

However, instead of going inside, she remained standing there, looking Severus in the eyes, trying to convey some sort of message. On his part, Severus couldn't look away from Monica's shining eyes. It was time, he recognised, to see if more could come of his relationship with this older, but so brave and warmhearted woman. So he leaned in and kissed her. A soft, nearly chaste kiss. She reacted immediately. She grabbed him around the neck and deepened the kiss. The sensation was very pleasant, comforting even. There was no passion, at least not on Severus' part, and after a while, in spite of him not being very experienced with women, he discerned none on Monica's part either.

She disentangled herself from his embrace...he had put his arms around her waist...and said, "Your friendship is precious to me."

There was no need for more. With his eyes, he communicated his understanding. Her friendship was precious to him, too. They couldn't force their feelings to be more than what they already were, and if they were meant to be only friends, then so be it. She nodded slightly. He took a step back, turned on the spot, and Apparated back to the gates of Hogwarts.

No sooner had he arrived than he wondered if he shouldn't have said something before he left. He was pretty sure Monica and he were in agreement regarding their relationship, but perhaps he ought to have put their revelation into words. He debated briefly to go back. In the end, he decided against it. Monica wasn't a woman to let confusion in a relationship fester and turn into an argument. She'd write to him if she wanted to discuss what had happened between them. Reassured by his line of thinking, Severus strode up to the castle doors just in time for supper in the great Hall.

In the following days, Severus spent more time than he would have liked to admit thinking about Monica. They might have non-verbally established that they were mere friends, but even that required a bit of contemplation on his part. He couldn't help but wonder how it would be different from his friendship with Lily. Above all, he wondered about what not to do to endanger this precious closeness to another...female...human being. And so, in typical Severus fashion...and unknown to him, in Hermione's fashion, too...he made a list:

Never insult her genetics, whether they were her Muggle origin or her hair.

Never hide information about the wizarding world from her.

Always be forthcoming with my own feelings.

Never pretend to know better than she does concerning what she is feeling.

Be kind, or as kind as a headmaster can be, to her daughter.

After the four days it took him to consider his friendship with Monica, he felt his mood lighten up. Not that it showed in his external demeanour. Too many years of repressing positive emotions prevented a spring from appearing in his step, but he wasn't as harsh with non-Slytherin students as he used to be. The only disquiet he experienced was Miss Granger's fault: he could feel her eyes on him whenever they were in the same room. The way she watched him was beyond mere curiosity for the man her mother was seeing, and it unnerved him.

So in turn, surreptitiously, so he wouldn't attract the attention of the other teachers, he watched her, too. Not as intensely as she did, but enough to grow aware of her as the young woman she'd become once she could spread her wings in the outside world: a caring, but fierce woman, not unlike Monica. Though Hermione would undoubtedly be fiercer than her mother. Growing up in the wizarding world, fighting for her life for years, had made her a formidable person. And she had a cunning streak that Monica didn't possess at all. Suddenly, he found himself hoping she'd make the same difference in the wizarding world that she had in the outcome of the war.

When Severus realised how much time he was spending thinking of Hermione, he was shocked and at once made the decision to stop thinking about her. If he hadn't, he might have heard his subconscious whispering, *If only she were a bit older.*

oOo

But settling back into a comfortable routine was out of question for Severus, of course. As soon as he'd decided to concentrate on his job and to give up dissecting his student's personality, a knock at his office door, followed by Miss Granger's entrance, brought his mind back to said student. He raised his eyebrows.

"Miss Granger," he said in greeting.

"Headmaster," she answered in the same level tone. "I hope this isn't a bad time?"

It was always a bad time, though being distracted from paperwork might not be a bad thing. "Have a seat." He gestured to one of the chairs sitting in front of his desk. "What can I do for you?"

She gave him a nervous smile, then inhaled as if she were going to launch into a speech. Knowing her, that was probably the case. "Well, as you know, I've chosen to do my seventh year at Hogwarts like a regular student, in spite of... the war. But... as much as I want to finish my schooling, I am... bored... a little."

This ought to be interesting. Severus chose a posture that should have her squirming in her seat while he himself remained comfortable enough to enjoy the show: he propped his elbows on his desk and steepled his hands under his chin. With determination, she carried on. "I overheard you...I was not trying to eavesdrop, I promise. I was just passing by," she hastened to clarify. Severus had no doubt that she was telling the truth. He was careful not to show it, though. She inhaled again. "I overheard you saying to Professor Flitwick that you hadn't had time to sort out your personal library yet since selling your house. I thought I'd propose to help you with that."

Her proposal took him by surprise, so much so that he didn't conceal his expression fast enough; she saw it. Severus remembered the conversation very well. Filius had cornered him in a corridor while the students were changing classes, thus cutting off his escape. He hadn't lied to the Charms teacher when he told him he hadn't had time to sort out his books. What he'd kept to himself was that he was glad for the excuse it gave him not to lend his books to anyone. He shuddered at the idea of the small teacher using them to climb up to his chair or his bed. However, in spite of having a history of defacing her books, he knew, he *just* knew that Miss Granger would treat any of his possessions with respect because respecting him was respecting her mother.

However, that didn't mean he was going to give into her request to help him easily. He needed to know more about her motives. "You're bored?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I am."

Somehow, he wasn't totally convinced. She was studying with a passion as far as he could see and hear from the other teachers.

"Are you sure you don't have another reason?" He saw the moment she decided to be upfront with him. He barely managed to suppress a smile.

"Since you're seeing my mother, I thought I'd like to get to know you better. Maybe we could even become friends."

Now that was the Gryffindor he knew. And he needed the help. He would just reply with his own unique brand of humour. "I have no idea what made you think you could strut in here and ask to be my friend." Miss Granger tried hard to hide her disappointment. "However, I'll admit to being in need of help to sort out my books. I also know your abilities in regards to such a task, so I accept your proposal."

Miss Granger beamed at him. Her luminous smile was reminiscent of her mother's, yet completely her own. It was as if she'd lit up from the inside, like Monica, but the quality of the light...its colour, its warmth...was all Hermione's. The realisation disconcerted him.

"When do I start?" she asked eagerly, bringing him back to more mundane matters.

"I'll see you Saturday at ten a.m. in this office."

"Thank you, Headmaster." She stood up to take her leave.

"It is I who should thank you," he replied evenly.

After she left, he stared at the closed door for a while before returning to his paperwork. Mindless work was good to clear one's mind.

oOo

As the days lengthened, as the sun shone brighter, if not more often, Severus got busier. Not a day went by without one or two teachers bothering him with questions about the exams. What's the date for the third year Defence Against the Dark Arts practical? What questions do you think will come up for the Potions N.E.W.T.? You'd think the teachers didn't know the syllabus or hadn't already been given the exam schedule.

Then there were the students. The career advice interviews were taking place for fifth and seventh years with their respective Head of House. It seemed that most of them weren't happy with what they'd been told and had taken it upon themselves to verify with him if they'd been given sound advice. And the phenomenon didn't stop with Slytherin house. Since when had he been appointed as career counsellor for the whole school? At least it gave him the opportunity to give a couple of vicious tongue-lashings to deserving dunderheads.

His only respite was gained in the company of the Granger women. His Saturdays were devoted to them, or as much of his Saturdays he could give them. The mornings were for the young Miss Granger, the evenings for Monica. However, his relief was short-lived on that front, too. After only two Saturdays spent *tête-à-tête* with Miss Granger...Hermione...it was clear to him that he was attracted to her. She had everything he liked in Monica, and more.

It started with the golden tints in her hair, courtesy of a rare ray of sun. He stared at the play of light, unblinking, until he inwardly shook his head and resumed his work, just in time before she looked up at him and asked a question.

The next time he found himself enthralled by her was when she raised on tiptoe to put a book away on the highest shelf. Her silhouette was all woman, with delicious curves, and her movements were efficient. She lacked grace, but the brisk, economical way she moved suited her so well... A feature that would have been unattractive on its own became alluring when part of a whole. It happened barely half-an-hour after he'd noticed her hair.

"Sir, I don't think that *Treatise about the Use of Semen in Potions* should go with Potions. I think it should go with the Dark Arts books."

That was the third time she'd disagreed with him. Each time she grew more confident in the expression of her disagreement. It was then that he noticed that her eyes held different nuances depending on her emotions. The glint of defiance was quickly becoming his favourite one. Add her blush at using the word 'semen', and he was sure he hadn't seen such loveliness in a long time.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, that using semen in potions has nothing to do with the Dark Arts."

She blushed deeper. "But human bodily fluids are mostly used to manipulate, or impersonate, or torture people!" she answered fervently.

"You forget there are a fair number of potions in which 'human bodily fluids' are used to heal, or in the case of semen, to fight sterility."

The fire in her eyes intensified. He felt one of his own starting in his heart.

"They are the minority," she objected.

"If you're sure," he purred.

Her renewed blush told him she was as affected by their interactions as he was, though he'd bet his library that she wasn't aware of her feelings. Yet.

Later that night, after an enjoyable evening in Monica's company, he came to the conclusion that mother and daughter had finally stripped him of Lily's stifling memory. Now all he had to do was to choose a path between his friendship with Monica and his fast growing attraction to Hermione.

The following week, Severus spent a considerable amount of time analysing his relationship with both Granger women. In fact, he realised he hadn't thought of Hermione as a girl for a while now. He was treading a very fine line there.

Monica was a wonderful person, caring and forgiving to a fault. But could she forgive him if she found out he had tender...and not so tender... feelings for her daughter? He couldn't revert to a life without her presence in it, that much was clear. In less than a year, she'd become his closest friend, closer than even Lucius had ever been. Closer than Lily had ever been. He tried to picture her reaction when he told her he wanted to woo Hermione. All he could see was her lovely faced marred by tears, her features distorted by hurt and betrayal.

On the other hand, the storm Hermione could stir in him by a mere look was exhilarating. He hadn't experienced such strong emotions since Lily's death. Didn't he deserve a bit of happiness? But... Hermione was so much younger than he was. What if another man, closer to her age range, caught her interest after she left Hogwarts? What if she grew tired of him? Would it be worth hurting Monica, to destroy their friendship, for a fleeting bout of bliss? Would a short time with a woman he loved make up for losing a friend?

Perhaps he would just wait and see where the situation led. Success was not reached by hasty decisions. Moreover, Hermione had yet to understand her own feelings. Until she did, it was better to watch. In the meantime, he'd enjoy their weekly meetings and their heated debates about a vast variety of subjects, not all of them academic in nature.

He didn't have to wait long. They were having one of their customary 'discussions' while sorting out his books.

"Why would using human blood be Dark magic?" Then, "Why is using dragon blood not considered as such?" Severus might be falling in love with Hermione, but nonetheless she sometimes irritated him a lot when she was that narrow-minded. Hadn't she ever heard that intent was what made the Dark Arts 'Dark', not the ingredients?

She took her time to answer, putting away an old tome full of Transfiguration diagrams. "Dragon blood is different because of the animal's magical properties. That prevents its use in Dark magic and rituals, whereas human blood has been proven to be more efficient than, say, chicken blood in most poisons requiring blood in their composition."

"And who proved that?" he snarled, then looked at the title of the book he had just picked up before stashing it a bit forcefully on a shelf. "Half-educated wizards who believe in superstitions and therefore make their experiments match their beliefs!"

Incredibly, her stubbornness exceeded Potter's. "That's not true," she replied in an equally heated tone. "You know very well that Benjamin Turpidge built his experiment carefully, that..." She stopped abruptly. She was staring at him, her mouth opened in a small "o" and her eyes wide, as Severus saw the revelation of her attraction to him dawning on her.

He returned her stare, curious about what she was going to do. He didn't even try to hide his own feelings. But she just blinked and changed the subject. But from that moment, she avoided his eyes and stuck to cataloguing the books. That was all Severus needed as an answer. She was going to choose her mother. And he couldn't hold it against her. So it was no surprise when she used an essay she had yet to write to leave earlier than usual. It was a surprise, though, when she came back the following week.

Things were different, though. She didn't engage him in lively discussions, anymore. He never met her in the corridors anymore. She averted her eyes whenever she came face to face with him, or during meals in the Great Hall. She looked more miserable and withdrawn than at the start of the school year. He'd have confronted her if he hadn't felt torn himself. Even if Hermione had made her choice and accepted its cost, Severus still hadn't decided on risking his friendship with Monica to pursue a romance with Hermione. Of course, if Hermione was steadfast in her decision to give him up, he wouldn't have much of a choice. His consolation was that he would still have Monica's companionship. But would that be enough, when there was more within reach? And would he be able to endure hearing Monica babble about Hermione meeting

someone else and being happy without him?

The following weeks were torture for Severus. Barely seeing Hermione wasn't enough by far to remove her from Severus' thoughts. Once his affection was given, it couldn't be rescinded. After all, he was the kind of man who could love a woman and be faithful to her for eighteen years after her death...it didn't even matter if said woman never returned the feeling. He tried to keep his unease from Monica. Of course, the woman could read him like an open book.

"Are you all right, Severus? You seem preoccupied. No trouble at school, I hope?"

By 'school', Severus knew she probably meant Hermione.

"No, none. Why would you think that?"

"That scowl is glued to your face, and you're so tense!"

"I often scowl," he said, emphasizing that expression for good measure in the hope of deflecting Monica's curiosity.

"It was the 'I have something on my mind' scowl, not the angry scowl."

Merlin's pants! Even Dumbledore hadn't been able to decipher his scowls! Were all women that intuitive? Before he could come up with a reply, she said, "You don't have to talk about it." Her knowing smile unnerved him. "But I'm here if you ever need a listening ear."

He would have loved to take Monica up on her offer, if only he wasn't in love with her daughter. Yes, in love. Severus knew himself well enough not to be mistaken about his own feelings. By the time he'd realised his emotions were more than attraction, it was too late to backtrack. The situation was worse than when he was in love with Lily. At that time, he had a rival, and he'd said some hurtful things to Lily. Now, he was pretty sure his affection was, or could be, reciprocated. Yet he couldn't act on it because it had the potential to hurt someone they both loved deeply. Life had never been fair with Severus. Why would that change now? Sighing inwardly, Severus resigned himself to a second stint of impossible love.

oOo

Being nervous wasn't among Severus' habits, but today he was. He'd slept poorly, had barely been able to swallow his breakfast, and had paced more than usual. When noon came, he put on his cloak and set off for the Grangers, where he'd been invited for lunch. It would be the first time in weeks that he'd see Hermione out of school. It wasn't fair to his host, Monica, but his thoughts centered entirely on her daughter.

When he arrived, he greeted Monica with his customary, chaste kiss on her cheek. Her smile was genuine, and he couldn't help but smile back. How many persons were happy to see him on their doorstep?

She led him to the living room. His nerves came back as Hermione stepped out of the kitchen.

"Miss Granger." Formality was such a helpful clutch when it came to keeping his composure.

"Headmaster," she answered likewise.

Yet the look he exchanged with her...a burning, full of longing look...refuted the formality of their previous words. When they broke eye contact, Severus turned to Monica. His words...what was he going to say...were stuck in his mouth. With dread, he saw that Monica had noticed the exchange. Before he could say anything to dispel her suspicion, she blurted out, "I'm going to take care of the kitchen!" She rushed from the room, leaving him and Hermione in a rather awkward position.

"How are you, Headmaster?" Hermione finally asked, twisting her hands together.

On any other occasion, with any other student, Severus would have taken advantage of the situation and would have teased the other person. As it was, his lack of social skills made itself felt rather keenly. Hermione was the last person on earth he wanted to offend.

"I'm fine. Thank you," he answered rather lamely. "And you?"

"Oh, the usual. I mean, I'm fine, too. Would you like to sit down?"

He agreed. They sat down at the table.

"How is your revision coming along?" It was as bad as talking about the weather, but Severus didn't know what other subject to broach without being too personal.

"I'm good. I'm up to date in every subject, and if the teachers don't give us too much homework, I think I'll read more about..." She cast a worried look at him, bit her lip, and soldiered on. "... the significance and uses of blood in general in magic."

Their last conversation about blood and potions was rather vivid in Severus' memory. If Hermione's lovely blush was any indication, she remembered it very well, too.

"I thought your opinion on the subject was set?" he challenged her with a raised eyebrow and a teasing smile.

"Er, I've had time to think about it since then. I might have been a bit hasty in adopting that position," she admitted sheepishly.

"Do you already have an idea of what books you might read?"

"Not yet, but I'll go check what the Restricted Section has."

Before he could suggest lending her one or two of his books, Monica came back in, unwittingly breaking the spell he was under in Hermione's presence. He quickly averted his eyes.

"The chicken smells delicious," she announced as she put the dish on the table.

Hermione bolted from her chair. "I'm going to fetch the potatoes."

Severus nearly shook his head. He'd seen her start guiltily when Monica had come back with the chicken, and now she'd rushed from the room as if a werewolf were chasing her. Time for a distraction. He stood up. "Let me help you serve the chicken."

When Hermione came back with the potatoes, she resumed her seat wordlessly. Severus didn't dare look at her, even from the corner of his eye. Instead, he concentrated on carving the chicken and distributing very equal pieces on all plates.

"Thank you, Severus."

They started to eat in silence. Soon, Monica's friendly nature couldn't bear the loaded silence anymore, and she started to talk about mundane things, like the climate in Scotland, the last exhibit at the British Museum, etc. Step by step, the atmosphere unfroze around the table, and before the plates were empty, conversation was flowing easily among the guests. Monica's skill of putting people at ease was definitely one that Severus and Hermione lacked.

After a while, Severus noticed that Monica was often leaving him alone with Hermione. He was sure the woman was plotting something when Hermione said, "You're being

very forgetful today, Mum. I hope you're not coming down with something." If the younger woman had noticed something, it was worth paying attention to it. He wondered what her motives were. Was she trying to play matchmaker? He knew his eyes easily found Hermione's whenever he let down his guard, and vice versa. He was also pretty sure that neither of them wanted to hurt Monica's feelings by acting on their reciprocal attraction. But what if Monica was all right with that? Until now, the thought hadn't even crossed his mind, but knowing Monica, it was very possible that she could accept it. She had such a generous nature...

They moved to the lounge to have some tea after lunch. Once again, Monica excused herself to get everything ready and left Hermione and Severus alone. To fill the silence, Severus carried on the conversation they'd been having five minutes ago. "I've heard from Minerva that Arthur Weasley is developing a project to open a Muggle-magical museum in an unused part of the Tower of London."

"Oh, really? I didn't know. What could there be in such a museum?" Hermione asked. "Diagrams explaining how to use electricity?"

"I think he has something a bit more hands-on in mind than diagrams. He's planning to exhibit 'scenes of Muggle life', like a kitchen in which witches and wizards could prepare a meal the Muggle way in a safe environment."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Not a bad idea, but I'm afraid most wizards will see that more as a recreational park, a leisure activity to keep children occupied on rainy Sunday afternoons rather than something they should learn about themselves."

"You're probably right," Severus acknowledged.

"Well, there's so much to do to get wizards to better understand Muggles. You'd think that with a majority of half-bloods, they'd manage to navigate the Muggle world with a better understanding of it. But the wizarding culture is so all-encompassing! Once you're part of it, there's nothing left beyond it."

"Do you really think so?"

"There are a lot of examples. Seamus Finnegan, for example. His dad's a Muggle, and yet he doesn't even know how to make coffee without magic!"

She was warming to her subject. It brought a charming shade of red to her cheeks, and the fire he liked so much was back in her eyes. He was completely fascinated by her.

At that moment Monica came back. Not for the first time, she broke the enchantment that enveloped her daughter and her friend. Hermione cast her eyes downward. But Severus met the older woman's gaze. Suddenly, he knew the fate of their friendship would be decided that instant.

A slight, barely visible nod.

Monica was giving her consent to his pursuing her daughter? His incredulity must have shown because she nodded again, more noticeably this time, and smiled. Gratitude washed over Severus, so strong and so unexpected that he thought he might cry.

"Tea is ready," Monica announced in a strangled voice.

"I'll help." Hermione jumped up and took the tray from her mother's hands. Monica sat down in an armchair opposite Severus while her daughter poured tea and served scones. Drinking tea gave each of them time to regain their composure and to think of something else to talk about. They ended the day speaking about American politics, of all things...even when Monica left Severus and Hermione alone for fifteen minutes on the pretext of clearing the tray and doing a bit of washing-up.

That night, alone in his bed with his thoughts, Severus allowed himself to dream of a better future.

oOo

Severus' dreams included a plan of action. If he wanted a better future, he'd have to roll up his sleeves and actively pursue the object of his affection. It didn't matter if she was already attracted to him. Hermione was worth the effort. He'd just need to be discreet about it, as long as she was a student.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," he said in his silkiest voice when he met her on her on the way to the Charms classroom. Crossing paths with Hermione as often as possible while being inconspicuous about it was part of his plan. A big part of it in fact. As Headmaster, it hadn't been very difficult for him to get hold of her time-table. Now all he had to do was to find a way for himself to be present in the same corridors, preferably when said corridors weren't crowded by students. And it was working, if her stunned expression, her pink cheeks and round eyes were any indication.

"Good... afternoon, Headmaster," she stammered.

Well, she stammered only the first time. Hermione quickly caught on with what was happening. This time around, she obviously didn't fight it. Like him, she probably couldn't resist the pull anymore. She ceased to blush and stammer, but her genuine happiness at seeing him several times a day never wavered. One day, Severus grew bolder and dared to brush her arm with his hand as he passed her by. He was rewarded by her staring at his hands a lot whenever they were in the same room, so he did it several times until she nearly grabbed his hand once. He shot her a warning glance...they were in a public place...which she interpreted accurately. But he understood her rather rash action. More than once he'd wanted to do the same. However, circumstances had forced them into this silent courtship, their untold desire showing in smouldering glances and fleeting touches.

Their only respite came Saturday morning. In Severus' library, under the pretence of cataloguing books, they could acknowledge their growing feelings for each other. They didn't dare touch each other more than was proper between Headmaster and pupil...too many portraits in the vicinity...but they could talk. They could go beyond the, "How was your day?" or "Did you do well in your Potions exam?"

"What was your favourite toy as a child?"

"Did you have a pet when you were a student here?"

"Do you prefer green or blue on me?"

"I've never voted in my life. What would be the point?"

"I think I'd like to visit France again someday."

"I... I don't want to speak about that part of my life. Not yet. Perhaps later."

"Don't worry. You don't have to speak about it if you don't want to. Have you ever read anything more boring than Divination books?"

And if a portrait ever remarked on how incongruous their choice of topics were, Hermione retorted rather heatedly that she was an adult and that no rules prevented her from developing a friendship with whomever she wanted. To which Dumbledore's portrait replied that he wished Severus the best in life.

oOo

At long last came the last day of school. Hermione boarded the Hogwarts Express with her friends. She was as cheerful as the other seventh years, though her good mood had nothing to do with leaving school.

Severus held a last staff meeting, and he forgot what was said before he'd even put a foot outside the staff room. His mind was on the upcoming dinner with the Grangers. He didn't even notice Professor McGonagall trying to catch his attention.

He was going to see Hermione outside school for the first time in weeks. He'd be free to hold her hand...under the table, of course. On the few occasions he'd seen her since Easter, he'd told Monica about his growing relationship with Hermione, not in detail, but enough. Monica didn't disapprove. "Don't break her heart. And don't let her break your heart. Please," was all she said. Severus couldn't have had a better friend!

But Hermione didn't know her mother's opinion. He hoped the two women would have *that* conversation out of the way before he arrived for dinner. Selfishly, he wanted a nice evening, and that didn't include the two women who were most important in his life turning into banshees. He was also certain that the lack of a satisfactory resolution in Monica's and Hermione's relationship had the potential to nip his nascent love life in the bud.

When Hermione opened the door to him, he noticed how broad her smile was with palpable relief. She was bursting with joy, and she held nothing back when she hugged him. Monica's smile was more subdued. However, she exuded the kind of deep happiness that can only come from a mother's heart. She hugged him, too. "I'm so happy," she whispered. That bode well for the evening, and beyond.

oOo

The following summer was the best Severus had ever had. Now free to pursue Hermione, he did so without restraint, just with decorum. It earned him a couple of difficult conversations and questioning, though, for example when McGonagall tracked him down in his house one morning:

"Hermione Granger, Severus?" she exclaimed in the middle of his living room. "She's no Lil..."

"Not another word," he cut her off, menace in his voice. "She's an adult, as I am. We don't have to justify our actions to you."

She glared at him, a fierce retort on her lips. "But..."

"Have a good day, Minerva. I'll see you at the start of term."

She pursed her lips and left in a huff.

Later, Dumbledore's portrait told him Minerva had confided her dismay to him.

"Don't worry, Severus," the painting encouraged Severus. "I've seen you interact with young Miss Granger. I assured Minerva that neither you nor she are making a mistake by being together, and that she ought to trust both of you more than that." That was one of the few times Severus was grateful for Dumbledore's meddling. The old man's word, even as a painting, had weight with the Gryffindor Head of House and the other teachers. His life would be easier later on.

Apart from those irritating moments, the rest of the time was bliss. Monica was the perfect friend and potential mother-in-law...Severus couldn't help but imagine it...always supportive and never intrusive. Of course, the dynamics of their relationship changed when he became Hermione's 'boyfriend' ('manfriend' would be more exact in Severus' opinion, but the English language did not care about his preferences). His meetings with Monica had become more friendly outings than romantic rendezvous: no more dinner at a restaurant just for the two of them, but instead afternoon teas in town. Monica took it in stride and easily fell into the role of the girlfriend's mother. Actually, the strangest thing about it all was that there was no awkwardness in the shift of their relationship.

Hermione... Just thinking her name was enough to send him daydreaming. Not that he would admit it aloud, though the portraits in his office were in the position to attest it. Luckily for Severus, they were bound to his bidding, and his bidding was to not breathe a word about it. He didn't want to give ammunition to the teachers...who would undoubtedly try to slip him queries for unnecessary expenses...or, heaven forbid, to Hermione. She didn't need to know how strong was the hold she had over him. Not yet, anyway.

He remembered very clearly their first kiss, not long after she was finished with school. At the end of their first date, they'd looked for a quiet, dark spot to Apparate Hermione back to her mother's house. When they found it, instead of Apparating right away, they stood there, rooted, hand in hand.

"It's a bit early to be going home on a Saturday evening," Hermione said huskily. Her face was always an open book to him. Now she clearly wanted him to say... or do something.

"Who said that?" His voice was just as hoarse, and he feared that his face was giving as much away as her expressive features.

"It's a Muggle tradition. Saturday nights are made to be up all night."

"We can stay up for a while, if you want."

"I'd love to, very much."

They were close, very close. Her hot breath blew over his face. Her eyes... her eyes were alight with anticipation. That was it. That was the moment that would seal their future.

He exhaled. "Yessss." Their lips met, shyly, tenderly. Against his will, Severus' eyes closed. Hermione's mouth was so sweet, so hot against his. Without thinking, he put his arms around her, and she did the same. Their kiss deepened, tongue searching tongue, in a slow, languorous caress. Their bodies moulded against each other. Before long, Severus felt as if he were on fire. By Hermione's reaction, she was, too. How they managed to put some distance between their bodies again was beyond Severus' comprehension.

"Again," she whispered. She captured his lips with hers again. Severus complied, not that he needed a lot of persuasion. They stumbled. Her back was against a brick wall. They didn't care. They carried on kissing, unaware of the outside world.

Finally, they disentangled themselves. "I don't want to stop, but your mother's going to worry."

That wasn't exactly true. Monica trusted Severus and Hermione to take care of themselves. As a courtesy to her, though, Severus wanted to bring back Hermione at a decent hour...if one considered two in the morning a decent hour. Had they been kissing that long?

They Apparated to her doorstep. After a last lingering kiss, Severus Apparated to his home. He went to bed on principle because, as he knew it would, sleep eluded him. How could he sleep when his mind and body kept re-enacting their kisses in an endless loop? But lack of sleep didn't prevent him from having a spring in his step on Sunday. Or any of the following days.

oOo

After a few weeks of working at the Ministry, Hermione didn't lose time in getting her own place: a small flat in London. Severus helped her to move in. For someone who was still living with her mother, the girl had a lot of things. Granted, a good part of them were new, but still, it was a lot. Afternoon was turning into evening as Severus slumped down in an armchair.

"Phew!" Hermione plopped down in the armchair next to his. "Who knew moving was so tiring, even with magic?"

Severus snorted. "Take it as life experience."

She cast him a dark look. "Don't mock me!"

"Never, my dear." His expression belied his words. Banter with Hermione was one of his favourite pastimes, after all. "Shall we have some tea?"

"Good idea. I'll take care of it." She obviously couldn't wait to use her new kitchen.

They enjoyed their tea in a comfortable silence until Hermione spoke:

"Severus? I... Would you mind... spending the night with me?"

While taken aback by her brazen question...far more brazen than her attitude: she was avoiding his eyes...Severus' imagination pounced on its implications. He hoped that he appeared far more composed than he felt when he put his cup down on the coffee table, though he was fairly sure his eyes would betray him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, absolutely." There was no denying the hunger that lurked in her eyes, too.

He held out his hand to her. "Let's put some sheets on the bed, then."