

# Can I Bring a Date?

by fizzabella

A new Dark Lord is rising. Deputy Headmaster (and Undercover Auror) Severus Snape needs an entree to Draco Malfoy's engagement party in order to gather evidence, and because the Malfoys are dotting every i and crossing every t so as not to be thought out of line after the war, the only way Severus can bring a date is to be engaged or married. Cue Hermione Granger, his colleague at Hogwarts, for whom he has developed tender feelings, but whom he can't simply talk to about his feelings.

## The Proposal

Chapter 1 of 1

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### Author's Note:

Written for LuciannaMalfoy for the Autumn 2011 Severus/Hermione Gift Exchange. Here is the delightful prompt I chose:

**Severus has to attend some sort of important function and it is absolutely important that he bring his 'wife', because otherwise he would not be let to attend this utterly important, but bachelor-discriminating function. However, he wants to gain something one can only get in that function, so he enlists the help of the charming Miss Granger.**

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*Italic text signifies unspoken thoughts.*

### The Proposal

Staff Lounge, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

April, 2008

"You want me to what?" Healer Hermione Granger looked up at her colleague, startled at the request he'd just made of her. Deputy Headmaster (and secretly, Auror) Severus Snape had, to borrow a Muggle phrase, seen warmer eyes across a duelling pitch.

"I want you to accompany me to Draco Malfoy's engagement ball at Malfoy manor the night before the Tenth Anniversary Victory celebration."

"That's what I thought you said." She studied him for a moment, then continued pouring her tea. "Are you out of your mind?"

He rolled his eyes and sighed theatrically.

"I am in full possession of all my faculties, Healer Granger." Her title was tagged on the end as a barb, since he knew she valued their collegial relationship very highly, and any return to formality in the absence of students or outsiders irked her.

She sat down on the small sofa that everyone on the staff recognized as theirs, and began to stir her tea, even though the sugar was already well-blended. The metallic scrape of the silver spoon in the porcelain cup got right up his nose, and she knew it. *Touché*, he thought to himself, knowing she was paying him back for the use of her title.

"Is Lucius even off of house arrest yet?"

"April is the last month. The ball is planned for the first of May."

"I guess you don't qualify as one of his former 'dangerous' associates," she commented. He didn't deign to reply, knowing that she was thinking aloud. "Or does the stricture against his former associates lift when the house arrest does?"

"It was actually lifted at Yule when Antonin Dolohov died in Azkaban. He was the last of the known Death Eaters."

"You don't like to dance, Severus; you already dragged me to Diagon Alley to select a gift for Draco and his fiancée, and you wouldn't spit on Lucius if he was on fire. So I can only conclude that you have an ulterior motive or you've lost your mind. You claim to possess all your faculties, so what are you up to?"

"I should have Obliviated you when I had the chance," he said conversationally, sitting down beside her on the sofa where they took tea nearly every afternoon. He took her teacup away from her and removed the spoon from it, wiping it dry and putting it in a pocket of his robes. Then he handed her back the teacup.

"It's not my fault that batch of Pepper-up had turned, causing your tongue to loosen. I would have been perfectly happy not knowing that our esteemed Deputy Headmaster is also a trained Auror on a long-term undercover assignment at Hogwarts."

"Pax, witch!" He held out his hands, palms out in the universal gesture of surrender. "Before you say any more, I should tell you the whole of it."

"There's more?" Her eyebrows climbed up into her hairline, and her eyes grew wide.

"You're going to want to skin me with a dull knife, but before you pour a torrent of wordy invective on my innocent head, bear in mind that I have been round and round this in my mind and I can't think of another way to accomplish this mission. This very important mission. This 'life-and-death, we-may-be-preventing-the-rise-of-a-new-Dark-Lord' sort of important."

"Good grief, you'd think we have to get married, from the sound of THAT warning." She had her teacup raised to her lips and was about to take a sip when she saw the look on his face. A moment later, her teacup clattered into its saucer and he barely caught it before it fell in her lap. He levitated it neatly onto the tea table, and, without thinking, reached out to capture her hand.

"We have to get married to attend this?" She snorted. "Have I missed the memo which said there's a flood on the way and Lucius is building an ark? And you thought it would be handy to have a Healer aboard?"

"Nothing so simple, I'm afraid. Look, are you staying brushed up on your Occlumency?" He got to his feet and began to pace. So much hinged on his ability to convince her to follow his plan.

She nodded. "I attended a training seminar just last month, remember?"

"Ah. Of course. The reason we have to marry is because the Malfoys are keeping the guest list very select. It's not the sort of thing where they send a reply card and one can fill in the number of people one is bringing. Look, I'll show you." He reached into a deep inner pocket of his robe and pulled out a deckle-edged envelope, from which he extracted a magically engraved invitation printed on heavy parchment trimmed with narrow green and silver ribbons.

Hermione took the invitation to study, running her finger over the raised lettering. As she studied the invitation, she read it aloud: "The honour of Severus Snape's presence is requested at a Ball to celebrate the engagement of Astoria Greengrass and Draco Malfoy." Even Severus' name had been engraved.

"So the invitation doesn't permit you to bring a guest. You can't attend a function like this by yourself?"

"I don't wish to go in without backup." They exchanged significant looks. Severus had gotten into a few scrapes due to his work for MLE, and more than once, Hermione had patched him up and put him back together. She had been a great deal of help to him over the years they'd been colleagues at Hogwarts.

"So, you can't just send an owl to Lucius and Narcissa, saying you'd like to bring me along?"

"Lucius and Narcissa have gone back to very formal manners since their re-acceptance into proper society," Severus explained with more patience than he felt. "Under their code of etiquette, it's only proper to ask to bring a guest if you have recently married or gotten engaged. And, given the antipathy between you and Lucius, it's hardly plausible that you'd ask to tag along without a significant reason to do so."

"My mum had an etiquette book with that kind of advice." Hermione continued to peruse the invitation to the engagement party. She projected an air of calm, but inside, she was wound as tight as piano wire. What was he suggesting? No, what was he really thinking?

Severus lowered his voice a notch, and said, silkily, "You commented just last week how well we work together."

"When we're brewing potions for the Hospital Wing and taking care of over-zealous Quidditch players, we do work well together," she replied, acid etching her voice. "I put them back together and you give them a lecture that sets their knickers on fire so they won't be so stupid in the future. Spying is rather a different game altogether, I should think." She met his gaze with her own direct one, and her mouth quirked up in a smile. "I AM still a Gryffindor, remember. Wasn't it you who said I couldn't lie convincingly if my life depended on it?"

"I talk too much. Besides, during the War, you did all right masquerading as Bellatrix Lestrange."

"With the aid of Polyjuice Potion," she retorted. "What must I take to pose as your wife?"

He sat down next to her on the sofa again.

"I could brew you a lus..."

She placed her fingers over his mouth and hushed him. "That won't be necessary...I mean, it's only the one night, right? They would hardly expect us to be skulking in the scullery, shagging our brains out, surely?"

He kept his expression neutral, but mentally, he was chuckling and rubbing his hands together. There were, in fact, potions one could drink in order to give a convincing performance of being in love. Granger knew the standard Potions catalogue nearly as well as he did himself; she'd be aware of those sorts of potions. His offer of a lust potion was unnecessary, was it? That boded very well for his agenda hidden within the planned mission to capture the next aspiring Dark Lord.

"One never knows what a Malfoy might do." He favoured her with a roll of the eyes and a droll half-smile. "Did I not mention this is a house party though, and we shall be there the entire weekend?"

"No, you did not mention it's a house party."

"I'm sure we'd only be allotted one room, with all the guests the Malfoys and Greengrasses are inviting. It would look so much more appropriate if we were married and not just...what's the term...shacking up?"

She made a face, then decided to attack the problem from a new angle. She pulled her wand out of the braided knot at the nape of her neck, and cast, in quick succession, a charm that locked the door, a charm that drew curtains across the portrait of a former Hogwarts teacher that was hung over the fireplace, and a charm that would contain their voices in a bubble so they wouldn't be overheard even if someone managed to unlock the door and blunder in on them.

"You said something about a new Dark Lord."

He nodded.

"Do you KNOW who it is? Not, can you prove it, but do you KNOW?"

"Know, as in, beyond a shadow of a doubt, no. But the evidence is piling up and it all points to one person."

"Tell me who it is?"

He raised his wand and layered a muffling charm on top of the one she'd already cast, as well as renewing the locking ward on the door, and adding a silencing spell that covered the entire room.

"The evidence points to it being Percy Weasley." Hermione Granger was every bit as accomplished an Occlumens as he was himself; she could be trusted with his suspicions.

"Dear Merlin!"

"I was thinking more along the lines of 'bloody hell', myself."

"That works just as well. Oh, Severus, if you're right, this is going to devastate Molly and Arthur."

"Indeed. Which is another reason why I need you to come with me. Molly and Arthur will be there; Lucius was obligated to invite the Wizengamot and the various cabinet members. Arthur is the Minister for Muggle Relations, and Lucius needs Arthur's political goodwill. If we get enough evidence to capture Percy, it will be comforting to the Weasleys to have you there. To say nothing of the fact that capturing Percy may involve some danger, not just to me, but to innocent bystanders. I really do need you, Hermione." He took her hand again. "Besides, I've been thinking it's time I settled down, anyway. We get along very well, and I like my life a great deal better with you in it than not. I like you; I think we'd rub along very comfortably together."

"I do agree that we get on well; you're the most interesting person I know," she said, smiling warmly at him. "I value your friendship very highly, Severus. But what if we can't make the transition from friends to lovers? And...I have to consider something else. Somewhere down the road, I would like to have a child or two. Not right away; I'm only just getting myself established as the Healer here. But in five or ten years, I can see I'd be ready to do that."

"I have no objection to the idea, in principle, at least. Our children would be an interesting mix, and stand to be smarter than both of us combined, which might be a bit of a challenge at some point. They'd be as curious as cats, and have horrible hair, though. If we ever did embark on this dangerous adventure, I want it known that I did warn you."

That brief, sardonic smile again, the one she had grown to love as it signified a shared understanding, an inside joke. "As far as making the transition from friends to lovers," his voice dropped into its lower register, and she felt her toes curling, "if I correctly understood what you started to say earlier, you're not exactly repulsed by me."

He was running his fingers lightly over the back of her hand, soft, feathery touches that were sending chills up and down her spine. His voice was an intimate purr. "I haven't found the proper occasion to tell you that I am attracted to you, Hermione. I don't think the transition would be all that difficult. In fact, I'm quite certain it would not be."

She kept her eyes lowered. There was no way she could hold her mental shields when he was stroking her hand and purring at her. Instead, by sheer effort of will, she managed to stammer, "It's if we didn't make it work that I'd be worrying. If we tried and failed, I mean to say."

*This is probably NOT the time to tell her that once she's yours, you're never going to let her go he decided. But she deserved to know that he cared a great deal for her / need to let her know I care and still leave her an out. She can't know I am...what was that old phrase we used as kids...playing for keeps.*

He mentally shifted gears and released her hand after one final caress.

"I did say the evidence was piling up, but it's more accurate to say that there are too many coincidences. We don't have admissible evidence yet. So it's likely to be rather a long project. Probably six months to a year. Instead of marriage, how do you feel about being handfast to me, for a year and a day? It's an old tradition, but many modern couples use it as a sort of trial period, to see if they can successfully live together. Handfasting contracts can cover things like children and assets like real estate and personal property, even intellectual property, so neither partner can take advantage of the other. What would you say to that?"

He was really serious. He wanted them to be together. Hermione felt as if she had been run over by the Hogwarts Express. But she had to make a decision.

Being Hermione, her logical mind had already assessed the contractual issues; she had thought of taking a magical law degree when she first started at the Wizarding University. Now she had to make a decision, and again, being Hermione, this decision came from her heart.

"Severus, I will handfast with you for a year and a day."

The smile that lit his eyes didn't spread to his mouth for more than a flickering instant, but he claimed her hand in his once again, and raised it to his lips. "You honour me more than I can say," he murmured. Then, in a less intimate tone, "May I ask Minerva to officiate at the ceremony?"

She nodded.

"Is this coming Saturday too soon? I hate to rush things, but we have OWLs and NEWTs coming up, and then the house party."

"I can be ready by Saturday."

He kissed her hand again. "Thank you, Hermione. Can you come with me now to speak to Minerva, or must you go back to the Hospital Wing?"

"I need to go back to work. I have twelve Gryffindors in the ward right now. They decided to play a pick-up game of Quidditch. None of them was hurt very badly, but all of them needed Skele-Grow."

He rolled his eyes. "Only twelve? With two sides, there should be fourteen."

"The two playing Seeker managed to pull up at the last minute, and avoided the crash AND the brawl. Do not ask me how; I requested they explain and none of them could."

He laughed, his hearty chuckles warming the room more than any fire ever could.

"I shan't ask you, then. I find I am looking forward to our future together, Healer Granger."

"I am, also, Professor Snape."

A last salute of her hand, a lingering caress, and Severus swept out of the room. Hermione automatically raised her teacup to her lips, found the tea had grown cold, and sighed as she got to her feet. Putty. She was putty in his hands. Hopefully, he would never realize that, or she was doomed.

~OoO~

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

"Enter."

Snape heard the Headmistress' response to his knock and entered her office with a light step. Minerva McGonagall was sitting at her desk and looked up as he swept in, and smiled at him. Her deputy, and one of her oldest friends, wasn't smiling, but he swept in, robes billowing, rather than stormed in, so she deduced that he was in a fairly good mood.

"What brings you to my office, Severus? And would you care for tea?"

He seated himself in the chair at the side of her desk and nodded his head. "I would like tea, thank you." He waited while she poured a cup of tea for him, and shook his head when she wafted a plate of biscuits over to him with her wand. "No biscuits, thank you."

"Well?"

"I have a request to make of you, Headmistress."

"A request?"

"As the Headmistress of Hogwarts, as leader of the Order of the Phoenix, and as a Priestess to the Goddess, Mistress Granger and I desire you to be the celebrant at our handfasting. This coming Saturday if you can possibly manage it."

Minerva's eyebrows went up in surprise as her eyes widened, but she smiled broadly as she handed him the plate of biscuits anyway.

"I told you she would say yes," she commented after a moment.

"You did, indeed. I prostrate myself in the face of your wisdom, O Great Minerva." His eyes, most uncharacteristically, were twinkling with merriment.

"Handfast for a year and a day?"

He nodded.

"You'll have a year and a day, to show her how much you truly love her."

"I do, you know." Another man might have made fulsome protestations of his feelings. That was not Severus' way, but Minerva, who knew him well, knew that those feelings would have to be near overwhelming for him to admit them at all.

"So, O Wise One, what advice have you for me?"

"That's easy to say, but will not be easy or comfortable for you, Severus." She paused and he frowned.

"I'm not going to like your advice, am I?"

"No, you will not. But I will give it anyway, and I hope you will act on it."

He nodded for her to continue, and she said simply, "You must let her see that you truly love her, even though it makes you vulnerable and gives her, at least from your point of view, power over you. And, Severus?"

He glanced up and she smiled reassuringly.

"You have the same power to hurt her. You must not lash out because you're frightened and feeling insecure."

"You realize this is more uncomfortable than spying for Riddle?"

"I know. But it is the only way to build an enduring relationship."

"I will find a way to do as you say. Not only do you know women in general better than I ever will, you know HER better, too."

"It may seem that way, but you know her very well, Severus. She is very open with her feelings among those she trusts."

For something to do, he sipped his cooling tea, and Minerva sipped hers, also. Perhaps it was time to change the subject to something a little more mundane.

"Where do you want to hold the ceremony?"

He looked up with a startled expression. "Good Merlin, I don't know. Is there a place where such things are traditionally held? I never expected to have to answer that question!"

"My garden balcony, then, I think. And you'll need witnesses. Two men and two women."

"I shall speak to Hermione about those. And we will invite a few people, I'm sure."

"The Order?"

"Yes, at least the ones who fought in the last battle."

"Let me take care of that for you, Severus. Make a list of your ministry colleagues you wish to invite and I shall see to it."

"Thank you, Minerva."

"You will be getting new robes, will you not?" The tone of her voice made it a command and not a question.

"If I must."

"You must. And they cannot be black. They must be elemental colours. Since I know you will not choose the red of the fire, allow me to suggest the navy blue of the deepest ocean waters. Or the deep green of pine needles."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Do you get your robes at Twilfitt and Tattings?"

He nodded and she smiled. "I'll order your robes for you, shall I?"

"Am I going to regret this if I allow you to do so?" The look of naked horror on his face made Minerva laugh out loud.

"I promise on my word of honour as a witch that I won't allow them to dress you like Lockhart." Her lips quirked up in a smile. "You could skip the question entirely, you know, and do the ritual skyclad."

"I think not."

Minerva heard icicles forming around the edges of his words, and he looked down his nose at her with a sneer.

"Rest easy, Severus. You know I would never make sport of you."

"I do know that. Saturday morning at sunrise, then?"

"Yes."

"You know, if you truly are only doing this to get an entree to Malfoy Manor, and you hurt Hermione because of it, I shall hex your bollocks off."

She was entirely serious now.

"If I were merely stringing Hermione along, I would deserve it," he said easily. "I really do care for her, far more, I realize, than I ever did for Lily."

"Severus, Lily Evans was the biggest mistake you ever made."

"Please, Minerva, spare me..." he started to say, but she overrode him, speaking with a fierceness that he'd never seen before.

"No, you're going to listen to me. I'll silence you if I must..." she threatened, and seeing she was serious, he subsided back into his seat.

"I'm going to tell you something I have never said before, but often thought, Severus. Lily Evans Potter was, overall, a shallow, silly, social-climbing woman who didn't deserve your friendship. James Potter was a fitting match for her, because neither of them felt anything more than pride and neither of them cared for anything more than social conventions. Lily didn't deserve your devotion, she wasn't worth your heartache and she certainly wasn't worth the guilt you suffered all those years. And her protecting her son as she did was the merest accident of ancient magic. Panicked Gryffindor stubbornness rather than a reasoned choice. I hope you have learned to let her go, because you deserve far better."

"I...don't know what to say."

"Say that you have let her go and moved on, and I shall be entirely satisfied."

He drew in a deep breath and started to protest, but the look in her eyes stopped him. "I did love her."

"Yes, I know you did. It's one of my greatest sorrows that she was too shallow to understand how truly devoted you were to her." She paused, and then added, "I am sure that Hermione understands devotion. She loves the same way, I think."

"I hope to find out for myself whether that is true."

"I think you will." She drew an appointment book out of her desk, and reached for quill and ink, jotting several things onto her calendar. "Have you purchased a ring?"

"I have my grandmother Prince's betrothal ring. I was going to offer that to Hermione. Grandmother Prince's birthday was in September and she married my grandfather in September, so her betrothal ring is a sapphire."

"Which is Hermione's birthstone?"

"A fortunate coincidence. If she doesn't care for the ring, I shall take her to a wizarding jeweller and we can pick out her ring together, but it would mean a great deal to me if she would accept Grandmother's ring."

"Well, you have everything organized quite nicely," Minerva commented. "Let me know if there is anything I can do for you between now and Saturday, Severus."

He rose to his feet and bowed to her. "Thank you, Minerva," he said formally, and swept out of her office.

She waited till she heard the revolving staircase stop, then called, "Winky?" and began making a list.

## **The Letter**

Down two flights from Minerva's office were Severus Snape's rooms, and the Deputy Headmaster had retired to his quarters to write a critically important letter. It had to have exactly the proper tone.

*By Owl*

*Lucius Malfoy*

*Malfoy Manor*

*Wiltshire*

*England*

*Dear Lucius,*

*I'm honoured to accept your kind invitation for May 3. I'm very pleased for Draco and shall be happy to raise a glass in honour of Astoria, the next Lady Malfoy. I must ask a great favour, however. You won't have heard my news because it's only just been settled, but I must ask that you include my wife in the invitation. On Saturday next,*

*Hermione Granger, (who is the Healer here at Hogwarts) and I shall be handfast, and the thought of attending your house party without her is unpleasant, and might lead to undesirable consequences for me. Think of what Narcissa would do to you if she were excluded from a house party you were attending, multiply that by a factor of five, and you will have an idea of what I face if Hermione is not invited. Do take pity on an old friend and invite my soon-to-be wife? If Draco could attend the handfasting, he would be welcome. It will be Saturday morning at sunrise.*

*Very sincerely,*

*Severus Snape*

Severus hoped Hermione would forgive the uncharitable implications about her in his letter to Lucius. But Lucius would respond to that appeal, where he would not understand the truth: that Severus, now that he had a real chance with Hermione, didn't want to be apart from her for any reason.

### **The Reply**

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England

"Well, well, well."

Lucius Malfoy looked up from the missive his house-elf had just put into his hands.

"We need to add another place at the table, right next to Severus, my dear."

Narcissa Malfoy looked up from the response list she was studying.

"What's that you said, Lucius?"

"Read this." Lucius got to his feet and handed the parchment to his wife, stopping to drop a kiss on her cheek. Unhurriedly, Narcissa perused the note from Severus, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Handfast! Dear Merlin, I never thought such a thing of Severus. You've had lunch with him twice since Yule; has he said nothing at all about this?"

Lucius shrugged. "He mentioned Granger a few times in passing...Granger went with me to this conference; we finished re-stocking the Hospital Wing with potions; Granger got this award at St. Mungo's. Ordinary chat, nothing that suggested an interest."

"How...odd. But she must be invited. Shall I write the note?"

Lucius nodded, and Narcissa got to her feet and went to her desk.

~OoO~

*By Owl*

*Severus Snape, Deputy Headmaster*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

*Hogsmeade, Scotland*

*Dear Severus,*

*You've quite taken our breath away with your news! Lucius tells me he hadn't an inkling that you had feelings for Mistress Granger, much less that you were even contemplating such a step as handfasting! We send you our warmest congratulations and wish you every happiness. Of course your dear Hermione is welcome at the house party! It would break Draco's heart if you weren't here the day we announce his engagement. We both look forward to welcoming Madam Snape to our home.*

*All our best to you,*

*Narcissa Malfoy*

~OoO~

### **The Kiss**

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The owls still delivered the mail at breakfast time; some things never changed. Severus and Hermione sat together at the table, eating and quietly conversing. Severus looked up when an owl dropped a letter into his lap. He recognized the Malfoy family crest on the seal, and smiled as he picked it up and slit the seal open. The envelope held two sheets of heavy parchment; one was Narcissa's note, the other was an invitation to the engagement party, this time bearing Hermione's name. He read the note, and his lips quirked up in the briefest of smiles. When he finished reading the note, he handed it to Hermione.

"So, I'm your dear Hermione, am I?" she chuckled.

"You are," he agreed, and she looked up sharply at the sincerity in his voice.

"Severus?"

"What?"

A little hesitantly, she asked, "Am I 'your dear Hermione'?"

"Will you run screaming from the table if I answer 'yes'?"

She smiled and shook her head.

"Then, yes, in fact, you ARE my dear Hermione. Your friendship is very dear to me, and I...I am looking forward to what we...that is, I hope we can use it as a foundation for something more."

She reached out and covered his hand with her own. "I hope that, too."

Minerva McGonagall was gazing at them fondly. To their horror, she got to her feet and went to her lectern in the centre of the platform.

"May I have your attention, please?"

She waited till the students quieted, then announced, "It's my very great pleasure to announce to you that Deputy Headmaster Snape and Healer Granger plan to be handfast on Saturday here at the school. There will be a Feast in their honour on Saturday night."

For a moment, the Great Hall seemed to ring with silence. Then, at the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables, the students stood and began applauding, and soon the rest of the student body joined in.

"They're happy for us." Severus was puzzled by the tear that trickled down Hermione's cheek, but she was smiling as Severus helped her to her feet.

The applause turned to cheers, and then to a chant: "Kiss her! Kiss Her! KISS HER!"

Hermione was expecting her companion to explode in a flurry of sharp words and points taken. Indeed, if Severus had still been the bitter, beaten man he had been before the war, that would have been his response, in all probability.

But Severus Snape was a changed man since the war, and his friendship with Hermione had shown him that she cared for him, valued him, and was on his side. Her accidental admission that a lust potion wouldn't be necessary had given him confidence, and with the students' chants ringing in his ears, something shifted in his mind and heart. He, Severus Snape, had gained the favour of a lady worth the title. After so many years of hiding his feelings, he decided, then and there, that he didn't want to hide anymore. Instead, Severus gave her a wicked grin and then tipped her chin up, leaned down and kissed her soundly.

Minerva McGonagall's jaw dropped and Hagrid knocked over his tankard of butterbeer. Pomona Sprout and Aurora Sinistra giggled behind their napkins, and the students chanting turned to cheers.

The kiss went on for a moment, just long enough to be a real kiss, and then Severus drew back from his fiancée, savouring her blush and the soft, confused look in her eyes.

"Severus?"

"We'll talk about this later, Mistress Granger," he murmured in her ear. "But we should sit down so the students can finish their breakfast." He held her chair for her, then called out to the students, "Thank you," as he seated himself.

He watched as Hermione raised her cup of tea to her lips. She was still flushed, and her hand trembled just a little bit. The blush and the tremor, and the absence of a ringing slap and a torrent of protests, told him that she hadn't been angered by his boldness; indeed, he suspected she had enjoyed the kiss, perhaps as much as he had. She'd felt tiny in his arms, delicate and precious, if he was honest with himself. *Admit it, Severus, she makes you feel like a bloody hero* he grumped, and dear Merlin, it's a lovely feeling.

He smirked in his thoughts. *Watch it, next you'll be pounding on your chest and looking for a vine to swing on* he chided himself.

He caught Hermione's eye frequently as they finished their breakfast, and when she put down her silverware and emptied her teacup, he pushed his chair away from the table.

"Allow me to escort you to the Hospital Wing, Hermione," he said, pulling her chair out for her.

"Thank you." Her smile contained all the warmth of a summer day, and her eyes were shining as she got to her feet and took his arm. Their walk to the Hospital Wing took about three minutes. They stopped before the doors of Hermione's domain, and she restrained him from entering the ward by catching hold of his wrist.

"Severus?"

"Hermione?"

"Why did you kiss me?" She squeezed his hand as she spoke, and before he could reply, she added, "I'm...it was lovely! But it's not what I expected, somehow."

He raised his hand to gently cup her cheek, and she closed her eyes and turned into his hand, a smile softening her face. Who could resist an invitation like that? He bent his head and kissed her again, longer this time, savouring the sensations of her mouth against his, her intractable hair somehow soft as feathers under his caressing fingers. She opened her eyes when he drew away from her, and he said tenderly,

"I kissed you because I wanted to. I have for a long time, actually; there was just never a proper time to tell you that." He smiled a rueful smile. "I want you to know I care for you, and because..." He laughed, his voice soft and husky. "And because I wanted everyone to know you've been claimed. You're taken."

He saw her shiver, saw her eyes grow bright with...passion? For him?

"I like that," she whispered. "I like the thought of belonging to you. But it means you belong to me, too."

"Yes, it certainly does. I'm all yours, Hermione."

She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest and holding tight. After a moment, he enfolded her in his arms and rested his chin on top of her curly head.

"I could get used to this," he murmured, and stood there with her, silently, for a few moments. When they drew apart it was with visible reluctance.

"There are some things we need to talk over before Saturday," she said softly. "Nothing bad, nothing scary, just some legal things we need to clarify before the ceremony."

"Very well. Shall we plan to do that tonight?"

She nodded.

"Let me escort you out to dinner, then," he suggested. "I actually own a flat in Muggle London; we can have dinner there, if that is agreeable to you?"

She nodded again.

"I'll come and get you when the students go in for dinner, shall I?"

A third nod.

"I will bid you farewell for now, Hermione." He captured her face between the palms of his hands and kissed her again, lingering as long as he dared, then released her and spun on his heels.