

Neither the Laurel Nor the Rose

by darnedchild

The Malfoy family expects to receive the finest service possible, no matter what the task. When Draco seeks the affections of Hermione Granger, he enlists the aid of a careful wordsmith – one Severus Snape. Written for Devsgma for the 2011 SSHG Exchange.

Part 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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Part One

Severus slid into his seat at the High Table and immediately reached for his cup of tea, ignoring the nauseatingly cheerful "Good Morning" from the Potions mistress on his left. Rather than appear offended, she merely smiled and passed him the small pot of marmalade without being asked.

He was well into his second cup, having demolished a large portion of his fry-up, before Severus acknowledged her. "Have you given any more thought to what we discussed last night?"

Hermione looked at him, tilting her head to the side in a way he found almost, well...not as annoying as when Sybill did it. Sybill always looked like some big-eyed, repulsive creature, confused by shiny colors and big words. Hermione looked ... inquisitive. Coy.

Attractive. Severus ignored the stray thought.

"Do you mean Mendelson's theory on the viability of using transfigured beetles and other creatures as ingredients in potions, or are you still trying to convince me that your Blishen's is superior to my Dungbarrel?"

He gave her a near smile, his lips relaxed and one side lifted ever so slightly. It was an expression that he rarely shared with anyone, but he had grown comfortable with Hermione over the last few years. Comfortable enough to spend the occasional quiet evening in front of his fire or hers, discussing their work, coworkers or whatever struck their fancy. Comfortable enough to consider her a friend.

"Firewhisky is always superior to spiced mead."

She looked like she was about to offer a reply when her attention was diverted by the parliament of owls entering the Great Hall, intent on delivering the morning mail.

Severus turned to watch his Slytherins receive their letters and packages. Either nothing illicit had been delivered, or the recipients were intelligent enough to hide any

offensive items until they were away from the watchful eye of their Head of House.

One of the owls flew the length of the Hall, then gracefully turned to glide toward the High Table. Severus recognized the bird as Malfoy's eagle owl as it landed on the table between his and Hermione's plates.

The owl vocalized disdainfully and lifted its talon, and Severus quickly retrieved the attached letter. His thumb swept across the distinctive wax seal bearing the Malfoy crest as Hermione offered the owl a piece of sausage from her plate. He was pleased to see that she was cautious about it, keeping her fingers well away from the bird's sharp beak. It took the treat and launched itself into the air.

Severus turned the envelope over in his hand, intending to tuck it into his robes to open later, and hesitated.

After a moment, he held the letter out to Hermione. "It's addressed to you."

She took it, briefly studying the seal before looking up at Severus, her brows furrowed in confusion. Severus turned back to his breakfast, visibly disinterested.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her discreetly pull her wand and cast several quick revealing charms on the letter under the table. Severus approved. Even now, ten years after the end of the Second War, there were still those who had been sympathetic to the Dark Lord and his cause.

Apparently assured that the letter posed no immediate threat, Hermione carefully slid her finger under the seal and opened the envelope. She withdrew a sheet of the finest parchment galleons could buy and read it.

"It's from Draco."

Severus made a noncommittal noise and spread marmalade on a piece of toast, waiting for her to elaborate without appearing too interested.

"He's invited me to supper."

He froze, the piece of toast halfway to his mouth. Slowly, Severus set the toast on his plate and turned to look at her. "What's the occasion?"

She shook her head and shrugged. "I don't know; he doesn't say."

"What will you say in reply?" he asked, mentally congratulating himself for sounding just a bit curious and not at all unnerved.

Hermione cast a quick look around to make sure no one else was paying attention to the two of them, then carefully tucked the parchment back into its envelope. "No, of course. I'll just tell him I've a prior commitment and leave it at that."

He made another vague noise and turned back to his toast. Severus chose not to consider why her refusal made him feel oddly relieved.

~oOo~

With growing impatience, Severus stood just outside the closed door to the Potions classroom. According to his pocket watch, the class should have let out five minutes ago.

Suddenly, the door opened and a wave of grumbling sixth-years swept out, automatically parting to give Severus a wide berth. Over the top of the student's heads, he could see Hermione at the front of the classroom, her lips set in a tight line of disapproval. She caught sight of him, standing just outside the doorway, still surrounded by the last of the exiting pupils.

"Professor Snape."

"Professor Granger," Severus replied, his tone as formal as hers had been.

He waited until the last of the little brats had disappeared down the dungeon corridors to enter the classroom. As he approached her desk, he noted that nothing seemed obviously amiss. There were no cauldrons melted to tables, no noxious fluids dripping from the ceiling, not even shards of broken jars cluttering the floor. Yet something had put her in a bad mood.

"Hermione." This greeting was warmer than his first had been.

"Severus." She gave him a small smile in return, and he was pleased to see that whatever had upset her could not have been that serious. Hermione sighed and rolled her shoulders, trying to release the tension.

The urge to step behind her and place his hands upon those shoulders, to knead the stress out of her muscles with his fingertips, was strong and unwelcome. Casual touches were not uncommon between them... he was aware that Hermione often reached out to touch his arm or the back of his hand, and he had been known to return similar gestures over the course of their friendship; but, no matter how innocent the intent, he would never presume to inflict such familiarity upon a colleague.

The thought of massaging Minerva's shoulders in such a manner made him shudder.

He realized Hermione had stopped gathering the parchments spread across her desktop to stare at him, her gaze growing concerned the longer he remained silent and still.

To cover for his momentary lapse, Severus flicked his fingers toward the chalkboard that was covered with instructions for the last class. "Are you done with that?"

Hermione smiled again, turning her attention back to straightening the pile of student essays. "Please."

With a swish of his wand an eraser leapt into action, wiping her writing from the board. "What did the horde of miscreants do this time?"

"Mister Crowley and Miss Babbleshot have had a falling out." Hermione paused while Severus muttered that even Sybill could have seen that coming. "Yes, well, be that as it may, Mister Crowley apparently felt that Miss Babbleshot had not spent enough time mourning the end of their relationship since she'd already moved on to Mister Wiblin."

She picked up the stack of essays and began to walk toward the door, Severus following close behind. "If memory serves, all three are in the class that just made haste to escape from the dungeons," he observed.

Hermione paused in the corridor, just outside the classroom. "Right in one. Barely five minutes into brewing a Hiccupper Solution, Crowley dumped the contents of his cauldron over Wiblin's head." At Severus' dismayed look, Hermione continued. "Just wait, it gets worse. I don't know what Crowley was actually attempting to brew; I suspect the boy had just been tossing whatever was at hand into his cauldron. Poor Wiblin was covered in a vast quantity of things that I could not identify at first glance. Babbleshot, clearly outraged at the treatment of her new paramour, cast Furnunculus, but missed Crowley and hit poor Miss MacFarlan. And that is when everything went to hell."

Severus valiantly tried to keep his lips from twitching in mirth, but the glare Hermione sent his way told him that he was unsuccessful.

"Long story short: several detentions, two vials of boil cure potion, a fair bit of curative spellwork, two students sent to the Hospital Wing, a massive cleanup, and a surprise essay assignment on the dangers of improper conduct in the Potions classroom later ... I need a drink. Or a biscuit. Or both. Both would be nice."

Severus didn't bother to hide his smirk this time. "We've got a little over an hour and a half before we have to report to the Great Hall for supper. Your room?" He tilted his head to the left. "Or mine?" This time he tilted it toward the right.

Hermione worried her lower lip for a moment as she considered the question. "Mine. I need to drop these essays off, and I've got better biscuits."

"I don't remember you complaining when you stole the only remaining biscuit off my plate last week," he noted as he guided her down the hall, his hand on the small of her back, fingers barely pressing against the fabric of her teaching robes.

~oOo~

The staff meeting had started more than a quarter of an hour before, and Severus was extremely irritated that a minor student scuffle in the hall had made him late. Therefore, he wasn't in the best of moods when he finally appeared and headed straight for the only empty chair near the far corner of the room.

Hermione had managed, once again, to be seated nearest the Headmistress. She shot him an indulgent look, a hint of a smile on her lips, as he made his brief excuses to Minerva. He didn't bother to pay more than the barest of attention to Filius' complaint about the strange, offensive smell wafting up from Hagrid's garden. Hermione was furiously scribbling in a notebook, and he watched her hand, noting the ever-present ink stains on her fingers.

The meeting continued for another twenty or thirty minutes before Minerva asked if anyone else had anything to add, then excused everyone.

The other teachers slowly filed out of the room in small clusters, Hermione bringing up the rear. She hesitated at the door, waiting for him to join her.

"Who did what this time?" she asked.

He grimaced, his earlier irritation returning. "Idiots. Two second-years fighting over one of Weasleys' Skiving Snackboxes in the corridor outside my classroom. I confiscated it, of course, and Filch will have company when he scrubs the moving staircases this weekend."

Hermione shook her head, her annoyance clearly faked. "You know I needed 'volunteers' to scrape the first-year cauldrons. You promised to send your extras my way."

Severus lowered his gaze, his contrition feigned, gesturing for her to go through the door before him. "You wouldn't have wanted them anyway; they're too young. No upper arm strength."

She snorted. As they walked down the hallway, she ripped a sheet of paper out of her notebook. It was covered in her familiar, compact handwriting.

"What's this?"

"It started out as notes for the parts of the meeting you missed, but then I noticed how attentive you weren't being once you finally showed up, and I kept writing. I know how much you hate it when the others know something you don't."

There was a spark of annoyance at the thought that she dared to chastise him, no matter how gently or kindheartedly she might have gone about it.

"I have been attending these meetings for almost as long as you've been alive, Hermione. I believe I can judge whether Minerva's blathering is important or not, even with my mind on other things."

She snatched the paper out of his hand. "Then I guess you don't care that Minerva is considering agreeing to Aurora's suggestion that each of us cut part of our budgets to help pay for the extremely expensive telescope she requisitioned."

"What?" Severus bellowed, grabbing for her notes.

Hermione laughed, dancing out of his reach and holding the paper over her head. "Oh no, I wouldn't want to offend you with my silly, unimportant note taking."

"Give me that, woman!" He refused to engage in her childish behavior, although the urge to deduct house points was nearly overpowering when she stuck her tongue out at him. "Granger."

"Snape," Hermione replied in a feminine imitation of his warning growl.

"You are incorrigible."

"Flatterer." With another laugh, she lowered her arm and offered the paper to him. "Next time you might want to at least skim the notes before you completely dismiss them."

"Know-it-all," he muttered under his breath even as he took the paper and tucked it into his robes.

~oOo~

Less than a week later, the familiar eagle owl made a return appearance. This time its delivery coincided with the last meal of the day, without the cover of the flurry of other owls to distract curious eyes. As the bird dropped a large oblong box between Severus and Hermione's supper plates, he couldn't help noticing that they had attracted the attention of most of the faculty and quite a few of the students seated at the near end of the House tables.

With an uneasy look toward Severus, Hermione reluctantly moved to open the box. Severus stilled her hand. He quickly cast a pair of charms to check for any jinxes or hexes, ignoring the faint whisper of gossip his spellwork generated amongst the Hufflepuffs. He was the Defence teacher, after all; it wouldn't hurt the little shits to see a practical application of a defensive spell or two.

Convinced that the box was safe from dark spells, he released her hand. Severus tilted his head to acknowledge her soft "Thank you" and watched as Hermione carefully opened the box.

Tucked atop a nest of deep green tissue paper was a folded card. She opened it and bit her lower lip.

Severus didn't bother hiding his impatient curiosity. "Well, what is it this time?"

"Draco, again." She shook her head as if she couldn't believe what she was reading. "He wants me to accept a cutting from the Malfoy conservatory as a gift and requests my company for a meal this coming weekend."

"You said you were going to turn him down the first time he asked." He threw his napkin down on the table, aware that he was being irrationally short with her.

"I did. Well, technically I only told him I was busy on the night he'd requested. I didn't tell him to bugger off or anything like that. I didn't want to be rude."

"You didn't want to be rude," Severus repeated, unable to keep a note of disbelief out of his voice.

She glared at him in reply.

Just then, Pomona piped up. She had obviously been eavesdropping from two seats down and was curious as to what Draco had sent. "Don't just sit there...open it, dear."

Hermione cautiously unfolded the tissue paper. Her gasp was loud enough to be heard halfway down the High Table.

Severus shifted closer to see what was in the box, aware that Pomona had stood up and was leaning over poor Filius to do the same.

Carefully incased inside a protective bubble was a plant, roughly half a meter from its strangely misshapen bulb to the topmost petal of the flowering head. It looked like some sort of a hybrid between a sweet pea and a pink lily, with a long stalk-like stem, and three blunt nodules around the bottom of the bulb. Nestled inside the petals of the flower was a thin tendril that moved, curling up on itself, then slowly unfurling to reveal a small stinger that struck the invisible barrier of the protective bubble.

"*Triffidus celestus*," Pomona hissed. Rather unnecessarily, as far as Severus was concerned. Any N.E.W.T. level Potions student should have been able to identify the plant, as the stinger's secretions were used in at least three poisons. Not that he'd ever allowed any of his students to actually brew those poisons, as Triffids were difficult to grow in captivity and did not react kindly to any attempts to milk them, making their venom exorbitantly expensive.

What annoyed him even more was that Lucius clearly had access to an adult Triffid and hadn't seen fit to share that tidbit of information *Bastard*.

"He's magnificent," whispered Pomona somewhat wistfully.

"He is," Hermione agreed with a nod of her head. She looked up, and Severus could see her intent in her expression before she spoke again. "And I think he would be best suited in one of your greenhouses, Pomona. Don't you agree, Severus?"

He was quick to offer his agreement, reaching for the box and passing it along to the Herbology professor when Hermione nudged it toward him. "If anyone could successfully nurture it to full growth, it's you."

Pomona beamed, gently cradling the box as one might hold a newborn babe, and quickly excused herself from the table.

Severus noted that Hermione still held Draco's note. He lowered his voice to keep the rest of the busybodies who were still looking in their direction from overhearing. "Perhaps this time you might be better served to make your refusal all-encompassing."

She nodded again, but Severus could see that she had her lower lip caught between her teeth, and he knew... he *just knew*...that he wasn't going to like what she was about to say. "Although, he is being rather persistent. I wonder what the harm would be in finding out what he wants?"

Hermione turned to look at him, blinking at the look on his face. "With proper precautions, of course."

Severus felt a rumbling growl building in his chest and drowned the noise in a large gulp of wine before it had a chance to escape.

"I would hardly call two attempts persistent, but I'm sure you know best. You *always* know best, don't you?"

He pretended not to notice the hurt in her eyes as he finished his meal and left the table.

~oOo~

The firewhisky heating his body from the inside out made it a bit too uncomfortable in front of the fire, but the flames were hypnotic. Severus was slouched upon his leather chair, limbs splayed wide and boneless. A glass of nearly empty firewhisky was precariously dangling from his hand, inches above the cold stone floor.

As he stared, unmoving, into the flames, his mind worked, bouncing from subject to subject but always coming back to the same thing. Hermione Granger.

Tonight was the night she had gone to meet Draco for supper. It was late enough that she was probably back in the castle, tucked safely into her bed.

Unless Draco had managed to charm her into *his* bed.

Severus blinked, annoyed at that thought, and took another long sip from his glass.

Hermione was far too intelligent to fall for Draco's superficial charms. *Then again, he had managed to sway her into agreeing to tonight's date.*

He snorted, the noise loud in the otherwise quiet room. Malfoys did *not date*. They had *liaisons*. Occasionally romantic, often carnal, and always calculated to be beneficial for Malfoy.

Severus wasn't sure if he meant Lucius or Draco at this point. He contemplated the bottom of his empty glass and considered getting up to refill it.

Getting up and crossing the room to the small liquor cabinet would put him that much closer to the door, and that would, in turn, put him that much closer to the corridor outside his hidden rooms. From there, it would only be a few minute's walk to the portrait that stood guard over Hermione's dungeon suite. A quick knock on her door, and he could confirm for himself whether or not she was home.

And alone.

What would he even say if she opened the door? What possible excuse could he have for disturbing her privacy this late in the evening?

Curiosity? She'd surely tell him it was none of his business. That's exactly what he would do if she were to appear at his door in the middle of the night, curious about his social engagement with a woman.

Concern for her safety? As if he really believed Hermione couldn't hold her own against Draco Malfoy. Lucius would be a different matter, but Severus was well aware that Hermione knew how to fight dirty, and he would be willing to offer nearly even odds if the two were ever to meet face to face with wands drawn.

Need to borrow a cup of powdered root of asphodel?

Severus snorted again. It was late, and if he wasn't going to pour another glass of firewhisky, he might as well go to bed.

He'd been avoiding Hermione for the last few days, showing up late to meals, making sure he didn't run into her in the halls ... Perhaps he would show up early for breakfast in the morning, let her jabber on to one of the other harpies at the table about her *date*, and then offer to walk with her to the library or wherever she wanted to disappear to. She was an intelligent girl; she'd spent enough time with him to recognize the gesture for what it was. An unspoken Snape apology.

A disturbance in his wards gave Severus an advanced warning that he was about to have a visitor. He was already standing when he heard the knock at his door.

Perhaps he wouldn't have to seek Hermione out in the morning after all.

He straightened the cuffs of his button-down shirt and ran a hand through his hair to smooth it back into place before opening the door. His greeting, a perfect blend of welcome and patient forbearance, died unspoken on his lips.

It wasn't Hermione standing at his threshold. It was her earlier companion, the Malfoy scion.

"Severus. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Severus sneered in response and gave very serious consideration to shutting the door in Draco's face. It was only the thought of dealing with both Lucius and Hermione's ire that had him stepping back and allowing Draco into his rooms.

"It's after midnight, Draco. I can only assume this isn't a social visit, so let's dispense with the usual polite pleasantries and skip right to the heart of the matter. What do you want?"

The blond scowled and settled into Severus' leather chair. "You're not even going to offer me a drink?"

Crossing his arms across his chest, Severus chose to remain standing rather than taking a seat on the sofa. "No."

"I knew this would be a waste of time, but Father insisted."

At the mention of Lucius, Severus grew tense. Nothing good ever came from Lucius insisting. Nothing good for Severus, at any rate. "Get. To. The point."

Draco looked very put out, which was only fair as that was exactly how Severus was feeling at the moment. "You may have noticed that I've been corresponding with Hermione Granger."

Severus sneered. "Your eagle owl is difficult to miss."

Judging from the smug expression on Draco's face, he thought that had been a compliment.

"Professor Sprout was quite pleased with your offering of the Triffid, as I'm sure Professor Granger has told you." Severus was betting she had done no such thing.

The smug expression disappeared with satisfying speed. "Professor Sprout? Why would she be pleased?"

"Why wouldn't she? It's not every day that Hogwarts is granted such a gift. Why, once it reaches maturity, I'm sure it will be the pride of Greenhouse Three."

Draco spluttered, then quickly schooled his features into impassivity. It was too late; Severus had already received the reaction he had been hoping for. Lucius would have never let so much slip with just a look, but Draco was not as calculating as his father.

Severus poured himself another firewhisky, then made himself comfortable on the sofa. "I interrupted you before. You were saying?"

With an envious look toward Severus' glass, Draco continued. "I asked Hermione to meet me this evening, where I expressed my interest in ... courting her."

Severus interrupted once more, "I thought you were practically engaged to the youngest Greengrass girl. Won't she find your sudden *interest* in Professor Granger to be an unwelcome complication to your relationship?"

"Astoria and I have parted company."

Severus took a moment to savor both the amber liquid in his glass and the look of bitterness and scarcely concealed longing on Draco's face. "So, you've moved on from Miss Greengrass to Professor Granger. Why?"

Draco raised a disdainful eyebrow, taking on a facsimile of the imperious expression that Lucius had perfected at an early age. "Do I need a reason?"

Giving the question more consideration than it probably warranted, Severus had to concede that if it were one of Hermione's wide circle of friendly acquaintances expressing an interest in pursuing her affections, he wouldn't suspect them of having an ulterior motive. *Unless it were Weasley. Then again, I will always suspect him of being up to something. Him and that brother of his, George.*

However, this wasn't one of her friends, not even Weasley. This was Draco Malfoy.

"Yes. You do." Severus studied the other man's face, eyes narrowed in contemplation. "Let's see ... Your father has been attempting to garner support and funds for his new committee. What better way to prove to all and sundry that he is a reformed and fully penitent man than to have his son romantically linked to a Muggle-born? A very prominent Muggle-born who just happens to be a war heroine and a close, personal friend of Harry Potter, the savior of the Wizarding World."

Judging by the way Draco suddenly became shifty eyed, Severus knew he was right.

"I can see what Lucius gets out of such an arrangement, but what's in it for you, Draco?"

There was a silent battle of wills that lasted the better part of a minute and a half... which Severus won without much effort on his part... before Draco mumbled something that Severus had to ask him to repeat.

"I said, she's a bossy cow with a nasty right hook."

Severus nearly choked on a sip of his firewhisky. "You want her to order you around and abuse you? Draco, there is nothing wrong with having an inclination toward an alternate lifestyle, but I do not think that Professor Granger is similarly inclined."

"What? No, I ..." Draco paused, eyes becoming slightly unfocused as he considered something. After a moment that dragged on far too long for Severus' comfort, Draco shook his head and continued. "No, that's not what I meant."

"Then, perhaps, you should clarify what, exactly, you do mean."

Draco sighed and stared into the distance beyond Severus' left shoulder. "I can remember how she was during school, bossing her friends around, always telling them to study or quit goofing off. At first I thought it was hilarious, Mother Granger and her widdle babies. Hell, once or twice I even pitied them, especially when she laid into one of them during supper because Weasel hadn't finished an essay or something equally stupid.

"But then, sometime around sixth year, I suddenly realized why Potter and the Weasel let her get away with it. Every bossy word out of her mouth was proof that she *heard* about them. She always seemed to have their best interest at heart, no matter how unpopular it made her; even her idiot friends eventually caught on to that."

"Perhaps she just enjoys making others feel intellectually inferior?" Severus offered, playing the devil's advocate.

Draco snorted. "She never offered Crabbe or Goyle a revision schedule, did she? No, she only pesters the ones she loves, so to speak."

"And her right hook?"

The blond flushed, refusing to meet Severus' eyes. "No comment."

Severus sipped his firewhisky. "Let me recap. You've broken off with Miss Greengrass, Lucius has urged you to take up with Professor Granger, and because of her ... unique nature, you have no objection to the idea. How, may I ask, do I figure into all of this? It sounds as if you and Lucius have figured it all out already."

He watched as Draco flopped back into the chair, slouching in a manner that would have made his mother blanch. "She laughed at me. Then she realized I was serious and stared at me like I was Loony Lovegood talking about gnarblebargles or whatever she went on about all the time.

"I calmly explained why we would be perfect for each other, appealing to her logical nature. She looked ... if I didn't know any better, I would say she looked sad. Then, she told me if I were truly serious, then I needed to woo her."

Draco looked perplexed. "What does that *even* mean?"

Severus was suddenly reminded of how Draco used to be such a whiny little shit. He had thought Draco had grown out of that over the years.

"I imagine it means the same thing it usually means. Flowers, chocolates, love letters, all of the usual trappings of a young couple in love." He managed to make the last word sound like something especially vile. "You most likely made the right choice in not sending a more traditional floral offering to her."

"But you said she gave the Triffid away?"

"This is true." Severus nodded, not particularly worried about concealing his amusement. "However, she did arrange to keep it on the grounds rather than having it immediately destroyed. I'm sure that counts for something. Just continue prostrating yourself at her feet, and I'm sure she'll be yours in no time at all."

Draco sat up straighter and narrowed his eyes at Severus, obviously picking up on the fact that the older man was mocking him. "Malfoys do *not* prostrate themselves at anyone's feet," he hissed. Severus thought about reminding him when they'd done just that for the Dark Lord, but refrained.

Then Draco's look became sly and almost cunning, and Severus wished he'd done it anyway. "Normally, women come to me. You can see how someone of my pedigree and standing would not want for companionship." He ignored Severus' sarcastic, "Of course," and continued, "Father confided that once he'd set eyes upon Mother, he'd never felt the need to pursue another."

This time it was nearly impossible to ignore the way Severus choked on his firewhisky. Draco glared for a moment, waiting until Severus could breathe again to go on. "That's when Father suggested I come to you. He assures me that you must have put some effort into trying to attract women at some point, and surely you've learned enough from your past failures to point me in the right direction."

"Did he?" Severus' tone was soft and deadly.

Draco, strangely enough... perhaps because he had not been Severus' student for nearly a decade...did not pick up on the danger. "Oh, yes. He said he distinctly remembered you chasing after a girl or two in your younger years."

"Indeed." Somehow, Severus' voice was even softer.

The younger man suddenly seemed to realize he might have misspoken. "Yes, so, moving on. Father thought you could help me out, offer some advice and all that."

Severus leaned back, laying his free arm upon the back of the sofa in a confident, casual pose. "And why would I possibly want to do that?"

Looking confused, as if he genuinely could not understand why Severus wouldn't be jumping at the chance to assist him, Draco stuttered, "But ... but don't you remember who found you in the Shrieking Shack? Father stopped your bleeding, got you to the castle and saved your life. You owe him."

Tilting his head in acknowledgement, Severus conceded that much. "This is true, but why should I help *you*, Draco?"

Comprehension finally dawned behind the younger man's eyes. "I see, you want it spelled out."

"In explicit, irrefutable terms so there is no confusion or room for misinterpretation."

Draco looked as if he might protest, then he shrugged. "Fair enough." It wasn't his life debt, after all. "Father thought you might need some additional persuasion. He has agreed that if you help me win Granger, he will consider your debt to him fulfilled."

Severus considered it for a moment. "What if Professor Granger ultimately decides not to marry you? I cannot be held accountable for the capricious whims of the female mind, and I will not risk Azkaban by brewing an illicit love potion, life debt or no." Not to be used on Hermione, and certainly not on Draco's behalf.

"Would I have your word that you would give me your best efforts, leaving no stone unturned, illegal brewing or spells aside?"

The fact that he was even considering this was a clue that he'd had too much to drink, but the thought of finally being out from under the specter of his life debt to Lucius was an incredible temptation. Hermione had already signaled some level of interest by agreeing to meet with Draco in the first place, not to mention instructing him to *woo* her. As much as the idea of Draco and Hermione together disgusted him, it would be easier to stomach than the first year she'd joined the teaching staff and had still been trying to work things out with Weasley.

No more life debt. I'd be a truly free man for the first time in decades.

"Agreed. As this involves Lucius, I want it in writing."

"Done," Draco crowed, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "You'll have the contract first thing in the morning. Now, tell me what I should do."

The phrase, "Get the hell out of my rooms," came to mind as Severus drained his glass.

"You've tried flowers already." He smirked. "Not as successful as one might have hoped." His amusement shifted into a frown as he continued to think. "Chocolates are almost universally well received ... except for when they aren't. Professor Granger does not strike me as the sort of woman who would see such a gift as a misguided commentary upon her weight, but perhaps it would be better to be safe, rather than sorry, for now."

Draco nodded along, willing to agree to almost anything Severus if it meant getting his father off his back.

"She's a literate woman; rarely do I see her without something to read close at hand," mused Severus.

"Oh!" Draco perked up, pleased to come up with an idea all on his own. "I could give her a book. An expensive book."

Severus rolled his eyes. "If you wish to take the easy, obvious route. Trust me, if Professor Granger desired a certain tome, she would have already made arrangements to procure it."

He gestured toward his desk and the small stack of parchment upon it. "Give her something else to read. Woo her with words. Write her a letter."

"Excellent idea!" Draco hurried over to the desk and sat behind it. He reached for Severus' quill and dipped it into the ink, then hesitated with the quill hovering over a pristine piece of parchment. "What should I write?"

Mumbling under his breath about the idiocy of some people and how it always fell to him to do everything, Severus pulled himself off the sofa and stalked to the closest bookshelf. After a moment's searching, he found a slim volume and crossed the room toward Draco, thumbing through the pages.

"There. She'll appreciate this one," he said as he thumped the book upon the desk, open to Shakespeare's Sonnet 130.

Draco's lips straightened into a flat line as he read, then folded into an unbecoming frown. "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun? What does that mean? Breasts are

dun, black wires, *breath reeks*. I can't tell her that her breath reeks! Have you lost your mind?"

Severus could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. He wasn't in the mood to explain about inverting Petrarchan conceits, especially since Draco was already trying his limited patience. "Fine." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Write your thoughts about her. Do not mention Lucius, by any means. Tell her why you want her for your companion."

Draco looked confused. "I should tell her she's a bossy cow?"

"For fuck's sake, Draco, give me the damn parchment."

* The title of this story comes from a line from Edmond Rostand's 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The quote can be found in Act 5.

Cyrano: I know, you will leave me with nothing... neither the laurel nor the rose. Take it all then! There is one possession I take with me from this place. Tonight when I stand before God...and bow low to him, so that my forehead brushes his footstool, the firmament... I will stand again and proudly show Him that one pure possession...which I have never ceased to cherish or to share with all...

* Triffids are the creation of John Wyndham, and first appeared in his 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids*. I have borrowed one for purely creative reasons, no infringement intended.

* Draco reads and quotes part of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, which I will reproduce in its entirety here, just in case someone is unfamiliar with it.

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red;

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damask, red and white,

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound;

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

William Shakespeare

Part 2

Chapter 2 of 2

The Malfoy family expects to receive the finest service possible, no matter what the task. When Draco seeks the affections of Hermione Granger, he enlists the aid of a careful wordsmith – one Severus Snape. Written for Devsgma for the 2011 SSHG Exchange.

Part Two

The last of the third-years quietly filed out of the Defence classroom the next morning. Severus knew they would wait until they were far down the corridor and out of range of his immediate wrath before they reverted to their normal exuberant selves. He didn't bother to look up from his desk as the door closed behind them, intent on reviewing his plans for the next lesson.

"What did Draco want?"

A mixture of shock and anger swept through him, yet his face was impassive when he raised his gaze to see Hermione standing before his desk.

Shock that she'd managed to make her way across the room without him noticing...obviously, his formerly well-honed survival instincts had been dulled by the past few years of relative peace. Anger that she'd obviously been spying on him.

"I was unaware that you'd decided to take up a new career in espionage, Hermione."

She leaned toward him, placing both hands atop the desk to brace herself, and brought her lips close to his ear to whisper, "The walls have ears."

The sudden twinge of discomfort must have been visible in his eyes because Hermione stood up and laughed. "Actually, Minerva ran into me before breakfast. She knew Draco was in the castle last night and thought he was visiting me."

He glanced toward the still closed classroom door, for once grateful that none of his seventh-years had decided to come to class early. With deliberate, menacing steps, Severus moved around his desk to join Hermione, eventually leaning his hip against it at her side and crossing his arms, hands tucked under the fabric of his robes.

"Dare I ask *why* Minerva would think such a thing?" There was something off in his voice, something that gave the question a darker undertone than he was comfortable with. After all, there was no real reason why he should be bothered by the clumsy insinuations of a gossiping old witch. It wasn't as if Draco and Hermione's burgeoning relationship was a surprise to him. For all he knew, Draco could have gone straight to her as soon as Severus kicked him out...not long after they'd struck their bargain.

His lips twisted as he remembered sitting at his desk after Draco had left, staring at the mostly blank parchment that contained only the words, "My dear Hermione," and then, farther down the page, "Why do you have such awful taste in suitors? You deserve so much better."

Severus had crumpled the parchment into a ball and tossed it toward the fireplace before stumbling off to bed.

Hermione laughed again, and Severus thought she might have even rolled her eyes as she too leaned against the desk. "Even though you have been too busy to talk with me these last few days, I did promise to take certain precautions before meeting with Draco. Since I couldn't very well tell you, I made sure Minerva knew where I was going, who I was meeting, and how long I thought I would be gone. I went up to visit her when I returned to the castle, and we had a small nightcap before I toddled off to bed."

She smoothed down the front of her robes, fingers picking at small flecks of dust or possibly cat hair. "I assumed that since he wasn't here to visit me, and since I also doubt he'd suddenly taken a fancy to one of the seventh-years, Draco was here to see you. Was I wrong?"

"Fishing for information?"

Hermione continued to fidget with her robes for a moment, the tension in her jaw leading him to suspect she was about to deny it. After a moment, she looked up, almost defiantly, and met his gaze. "Perhaps."

It was Severus who looked away first.

"You should be proud. I don't remember the last time I saw Draco so disconcerted," he offered as his way of conceding that she had not been wrong.

He heard her exhale, a long drawn-out huff that managed to sound almost wistful. Severus lowered his head, letting his hair fall forward so that he could watch her through the dark curtain. She was staring straight ahead, as if looking at something in the far distance that he could not see.

"That wasn't my intention. I just ... I don't know how much Draco told you about our conversation last night, but it was not what I was expecting."

Severus saw her blink slowly, the corners of her lips tilting downward in a way that had him wishing he could somehow end her pensiveness.

"Although, if I'd taken any time to think about it, it was exactly what I should have expected," she continued.

He frowned, not sure he was following her line of thought.

"He was very analytical about it, you see. Someone, and I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and say it was Draco, had put a fair bit of thought into the idea of the two of us...as a couple. It was all very smooth. Rehearsed."

Her voice turned distant in a way that Severus did not like. "Emotionless."

Hermione blinked again and shook her head as if to clear it.

"You sound disappointed. I am told you could do much worse than Draco Malfoy."

She laughed, and Severus felt an unexpected jolt of pleasure that he'd been the one to cause her mirth.

"I suppose there are worse things, this is true. What witch wouldn't jump at the chance to be seen on Draco's arm?"

"And yet, you are ... unhappy?"

He felt, more than saw, her shrug. Severus hadn't realized they were quite so close together. "Not unhappy, just ... wishing for the moon."

"Explain."

"You'll think me silly."

"Most likely, but that has never stopped you before. Tell me what you meant. Tell me what you wish for."

"I want ... to be admired, wanted, loved. For me. Not because I'm Harry Potter's friend, or because people consider me famous, or because they want to send a message by being seen with me. I want someone to want me because I'm a swotty bookworm with an atrocious sense of humor and unspeakable hair."

"You do ask for a lot, don't you," Severus deadpanned.

Hermione looked horrified for a moment, then seemed to realize he was joking. She hit him on the arm with her closed fist, just hard enough to be unpleasant. "You are an arse."

"So I've heard."

~oOo~

He slid the quill back into its stand without looking, eyes otherwise occupied in scanning over the parchment one more time and making sure it was adequate.

Perfect.

Severus harrumphed at the nauseatingly sentimental thought. The only reason he'd spent the past several hours composing a single letter was because he had sworn to Draco that he would give the endeavor his best efforts. It had absolutely nothing to do with his earlier conversation with Hermione, or some overly mawkish desire to fulfill her wish, even if it was only a temporary illusion.

Properly reassured that there was no reason anyone, including himself, could question his motives, Severus finished blotting the valediction until he was sure the ink would not smear. He carefully folded the letter, scribbled a quick note to Draco, and bundled both together for delivery.

The house-elf he summoned was more than delighted at being asked to make sure the missive reached its proper destination.

He did feel an uncomfortable twinge of something that could have been unease in the pit of his stomach as the elf disappeared, the small letter-bundle clutched in its pale,

long-fingered hand.

After a moment's consideration, Severus decided it was merely indigestion brought on by eating that second pasty at supper and shuffled to bed.

~oOo~

The staff room was relatively peaceful, considering Aurora and Pomona were in the corner arguing over next week's match between the Holyhead Harpies and the Caerphilly Catapults. Severus was seated near the sofa where Hermione had spread out her lesson plans. Filius perched atop a chair near the fire, reading the *Daily Prophet* and occasionally grumbling over some article about the latest shenanigans in the Ministry.

The fire flared green, and a letter flew from the grate, landing on the floor in front of the fireplace. Filius obligingly flicked his wand and levitated the letter closer until he could see to whom it was addressed. With a flourish, he sent the letter drifting toward Hermione. "It's for you, my dear."

Severus could clearly see the green of the Malfoy wax seal as the letter floated past.

He wasn't the only one. Pomona perked up as Hermione snatched it out of the air. Before Hermione could tuck the letter into her robes, Pomona tittered, "Is that from your young Mister Malfoy?"

Hermione looked as if she was going to protest...cheeks paler than he could remember seeing them since the last time she'd been partnered with Longbottom in one of his classes...before silently nodding.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

Severus thought Hermione looked rather reluctant as she broke the seal. He watched as she skimmed the letter, her eyes going wide in response. His memory supplied the words she was reading.

My dear Hermione,

This is not a declaration of love. It is far too early for such sentiment; the courtship has barely begun.

You asked to be wooed, dear Hermione, and wooed you shall be.

The rest of the letter spoke of admiration for her confidence, her intellect, her grace, and kindness. There followed a request for continued permission to pay court, in the hopes of establishing a friendship and, eventually, more.

And finally, he had ended the letter with two carefully chosen words. *Your Admirer.*

"Will there be another endowment to the Hogwarts' greenhouses forthcoming?" Pomona snickered.

"Or, by any chance, anything of interest for the Astronomy department? I have heard that Abraxas Malfoy had, at one time, a magnificent example of a Cassegrain telescope in his collection," added Aurora, sounding disturbingly eager.

"I'm afraid not, ladies," Hermione replied, eyeing them reproachfully over the top of the parchment.

She returned her attention to the letter, and Severus let his eyes wander over her face, trying to read her expression.

He thought she was pleased with it. There appeared to be a small, winsome smile upon her lips which boded well.

"Don't keep us in suspense, dear. What does it say?" His study of Hermione was interrupted by the Herbology professor once more.

"Perhaps she does not wish to share with the room at large, Pomona. I thought that private correspondence, by its very definition, would be considered *private*." Severus cast her a withering look to go along with his chastisement.

"Oh, tosh, Severus. You're just jealous that no one sends you love letters."

"Thank the heavens for that," he sneered. "For surely that would be a sign of the coming apocalypse, would it not?"

From across the room, he could hear Filius giggling.

He felt the niggling weight of someone's gaze upon him and turned his head to find the source. Hermione was watching him, her eyes thoughtful, lower lip tucked ever so slightly between her teeth in the manner he had come to associate with a Hermione who was deep in thought. He wasn't sure why her scrutiny made him uneasy, but it did.

Severus returned her look with one of his own, one eyebrow slightly raised in inquiry.

Hermione glanced down at the letter, then back up at him. After a moment, she nodded toward the door and began to gather her things.

He humphed in annoyance, but got up from his chair and moved to hold the door open for her. As they stepped into the corridor outside, Severus heard Pomona grumbling, "I bet she tells *him* what it says. Waste of good gossip, that is."

The door swung shut behind them before Aurora could offer her opinion.

"As much as I usually appreciate any excuse to get away from that pair of nosy parkers, I was comfortable, and Filius' commentary on the current bumbblings of the Ministry was entertaining enough. I'm assuming you had a reason for dragging me out here?"

He noticed that Hermione merely rolled her eyes rather than pointing out that she had done no such thing. Severus briefly felt his lips twitch in amusement.

She lead him further from the staff room door...and any eager ears that might have been pressed against it...and offered the letter to him.

Severus hesitated before taking it. "That letter was not meant for my eyes, Hermione."

"Please, just read it."

With obvious reluctance, Severus unfolded the parchment and let his eyes wander across the words he already knew by heart. To his horror, the idiot boy hadn't even bothered to copy the letter in his own handwriting. Draco had managed to remember to sign it; the large, elaborate D followed by indecipherable squiggles that made up his usual signature stood out under the clear, carefully formed letters that Severus had penned. Severus had taken pains to make sure Draco could read each word and had not reverted to his usual spidery scrawl. *Perhaps the difference would be enough to keep Hermione from recognizing the true author.*

He looked up to find her watching him and was not surprised to see that she was once again torturing her lower lip between her teeth. "Stop that." The admonishment came out softer than he expected, almost gentle.

She blinked, seemingly caught by surprise. "Pardon?"

"Never mind." Severus shook his head, annoyed with himself. He waved the letter in her direction. "What am I supposed to be looking for?"

Does she know?

Hermione took the parchment back and studied it once more. "Don't you think it's a bit ... out of character? For Draco?"

"Do you know him well enough that you would consider yourself an expert on what is in-character for him?" Severus asked.

"Well," Hermione began, looking slightly defensive, "I remember how he was in school..."

"That was a long time ago. You've changed since then. I've changed. Is it so far-fetched to think that Draco has as well?"

Her doubt seemed to be wavering. Severus pushed forward, pointing toward the parchment. "Perhaps the author of that letter is trying to tell you something that he has been unable to express until now."

"Do you really think so?"

"There's only one way to know for certain."

Hermione searched his expression for a moment, and Severus wondered what she was looking for. Whatever it was, she seemed to have found it because the tension seemed to melt from her shoulders and her lips softened.

"You're right." She held the letter up between them. "The man who wrote this ... I'd be a fool not to see where this could lead, wouldn't I? You've given me much to think about, Severus. Thank you."

Hermione surprised him by leaning close and pressing an all-too-brief kiss against his cheek. Severus was stunned into momentary paralysis by the soft warmth of her lips against his skin, and by the time he was able to react, she was already disappearing down the corridor.

As he watched her walk away, Severus felt the strangest urge to transfigure Draco into a dust mop.

~oOo~

Severus wasn't particularly surprised when his fire flared green the next evening and Draco's voice floated out. "Severus, I must speak with you."

Setting aside the book he'd been reading, Severus stood to greet his visitor. His voice wasn't particularly welcoming as he granted Draco permission to come through.

The blond wrinkled his nose as he stepped into sitting room and used his wand to remove any traces of Floo powder or ash from his robes. Once he was satisfied that he was immaculate once more, Draco brandished a small packet of parchment in the air. "What is the meaning of this?"

"What makes you think I have any idea what 'this' is?" Severus replied, though he did have his suspicions. Hermione had confided earlier in the day that she had sent a reply to Draco's letter, and though she hadn't given him any specifics, she had been in high spirits.

"She wrote back. She wants to continue our 'correspondence' and is amiable to forming a friendship and...perhaps...more between us. What sort of Mooncalf shit is that?" Draco flung Hermione's letter at Severus, who caught it before it could connect with his chest.

"Did you even bother reading the letter you sent her? Or do you make a habit of blindly signing your name to anything put before you, Draco?" His fingers itched to unfold the parchment, but he waited, not wanting to appear eager in front of the other man.

Draco's fair skin took on the faintest flush of pink, and he refused to look directly at Severus. "I was ... distracted, the night you sent it."

Severus briefly searched his memory. *Ah, yes.* He sneered and moved across the room to seat himself behind his desk. "I do remember Poppy mentioning something she'd read in the gossip pages, something about young Miss Greengrass being spotted in the company of Adrian Pucey. As you and Miss Greengrass have parted company, that couldn't have been what was so distracting, could it?"

"Bugger off, Snape."

A nasty smile twisted his lips as Severus replied, "You're the visitor here; perhaps it is you who should leave?"

Draco's fists clenched at his side, and he took a deep breath before pointing toward Hermione's letter, which was now sitting upon Severus' desk. "Not before we deal with that."

"As you wish." Severus made a show of opening the letter and flattening the parchment against the desktop to read it. Her note was brief, addressed to her admirer, and it confirmed what Draco had already told him. There was also a mention of wanting to get to know the man behind the persona, but that wasn't unexpected in light of their discussion the day before.

"This seems straightforward enough, even for you, Draco. What were you expecting?"

"I was expecting that once she knew I was serious about being a couple, that she'd ..."

"Eagerly fall at your feet?" Did the idiot even *know* her?

"No, of course not." Draco ran his hand through his hair.

Severus was annoyed to see that the blond locks effortlessly settled back into place. He refused to think about how unkempt his own must look after a day of demonstrating and dodging hexes in the classroom. Not that it mattered; no one cared what he looked like, and there was absolutely no reason to compare himself to the other man.

Draco crossed the room and perched his arse on the edge of the desk, ignoring Severus' scowl. "I wasn't expecting her to want another letter. I figured we'd send one, she'd see I was willing to play along with this wooing nonsense, and then we'd attend a few parties, have a few meals together, that sort of thing."

"Be spotted by the papers, photographed canoodling in all the right places, have your names linked amongst all the right people?" Severus helpfully supplied.

Draco didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed.

"Exactly. Then, after a proper time, if things went well and we were both amiable, we'd announce our engagement and eventually marry."

"Why, Draco, I never knew you had such a passionate nature."

He could tell by the way Draco's face scrunched up that the younger man was fighting to keep from letting loose with whatever retort was on the tip of his tongue *Smart boy.*

Battle apparently won, Draco finally spoke, "Let's just focus on the matter at hand, shall we?"

Severus used two of his fingers to slide the parchment across the desk toward Draco. "Simple enough. You answer it."

Horrified did not begin to describe Draco's expression. "And say what?"

"Tell her what you just told me. Tell her you're madly in love with her. Tell her you fancy goats. I do not care what you tell her. I did my part...the door is open, now it's up to you to step through it." Severus leaned back in his chair, arms crossed across his chest, clearly indicating that he was done with the subject.

Draco glared at him, then smiled in a way that made Severus uneasy. It was the same sort of smile Lucius wore whenever he ended up with the upper hand in some dealing or another. Draco slid the letter back across the desk, nearly pushing the parchment into Severus' lap. "I've always envied your way with words, Severus. You've always known just what to say, whether you were cutting someone down or holding our rapt attention in class. I need your skill, and you will assist me because I have two words of my own."

He stood up and leaned across the desk. "Life. Debt."

Draco jumped back as if expecting to be hit by the Cruciatus and almost looked surprised when Severus didn't even bother to scowl in his direction.

"That's the best you can do?" Severus shook his head, giving Draco a pitying look. "Fine. But your father's influence and favors will only stretch so far, Draco. Eventually, you will have to stand on your own two feet."

The blond briefly looked thoughtful, then flashed Severus a youthful grin. "But not today. You'll have to excuse me for running off, but I'm meeting Adrian for drinks. Astoria has already broken his heart, you see, and now he wants to tell me all about how she callously used him. I plan on ordering the most expensive cognac they have on the premises...on his tab, of course...and drink him under the table."

Severus wondered why he even bothered trying. He waved Draco off and waited until the other man had disappeared through the Floo to reach for a clean piece of parchment. After a moment's hesitation, he began to write.

My dear Hermione,

You have no idea how your response moved me.

~oOo~

The dichotomy of the next six weeks was enough to drive Severus to drink, although he had learned his lesson about overindulging with firewhisky. That's how he had ended up in this mess in the first place, after all.

By day, he was Hermione's coworker and friend, sharing sarcastic quips and the occasional chocolate biscuit. By night, he labored over love letters, each more personal and intimate than the last, crafting phrases that carefully straddled the line between misdirection and truth.

It was very important to him that he had not *lied* to Hermione. He had let her form her own...incorrect...conclusions and omitted certain details, but he had never lied.

The distinction would provide little comfort in the face of Hermione's inevitable feelings of betrayal if his part in the Malfoys' scheme were ever to come to light.

Which it would, eventually, because that's how these sorts of things always play out in my life Severus thought one night as he contemplated the ceiling above his bed.

He'd grown closer to her over the last few weeks, through reading her letters and, unexpectedly, during their daily talks. They'd been friends before, but now they were *more*. Once she'd confided her desire for romance, the proverbial floodgates had opened. She told him of her childhood, how she wanted to be the prime minister when she was five, and even confessed her "unholy addiction" to Curly Wurlys. Severus, for his part, had briefly glossed over the highlights of his own youth, confirmed that he had been in love with Lily Evans and that she would always hold a place in his heart but nearly dying had a way of putting things into perspective, and had grudgingly admitted that Potter might not be as repugnant as he had originally thought.

Their talks were never dull, serious one day and filled with teasing and laughter (mostly hers) the next. Quite often, they parted company with the press of her lips against his cheek. So often, in fact, that Severus had begun to anticipate that moment, going so far as to proffer his cheek for her kiss when she leaned closer. Once, he'd even caught himself feeling inexplicably bereft when she had left without the gesture.

That's when he realized what he'd done.

That moment when he'd watched her weave her way through a sea of milling students and knew that it would have been disastrous for his reputation to be seen receiving a buss on the cheek from a fellow staff member and yet still wished she had done so anyway that was when he knew he'd fallen for her.

He had fallen for the girl, but she had fallen for the handsome boy, and it was all Severus' fault.

And wasn't that just a phenomenal cock-up?

He stared into the darkness of his bedroom and wondered when he'd become so utterly pathetic.

~oOo~

The last thing Severus expected to see when he strode through the dungeon corridors on the way to retrieve a reference book from his rooms was Hermione and Draco in front of her classroom. Hermione smiled when he approached, and if Draco was displeased to see him, the younger man hid it well. If anything, he seemed relieved that Severus had joined them.

Draco quickly made his excuses, reassuring Hermione that he would have stayed to continue their discussion if the Headmistress hadn't been expecting him shortly. Then he grasped her hand and brought it to his lips, briefly sweeping them against her knuckles. With a nod toward Severus, Draco left them.

As soon as they were alone, Hermione laughed. The sound was joyous, and it made Severus ache to hear it again.

She turned toward him and performed an awkward curtsy, offering her hand. "M'lord."

He really had no choice but to take it, replying with an equally formal, "M'lady," as he bowed over her fingers. He could feel his heart pounding, could hear the blood rushing, as he brushed his lips across the softness of her skin. Somehow, he mustered the self-discipline to raise his head, expecting to see her ready smile. Hoping to hear her laughter once more.

There was a smile, but a soft, thoughtful one. "It's time."

"Time for what?" Severus asked, reluctantly releasing her hand.

"Time to stop hiding behind the letters."

Bile rose up into the back of his throat, forcing him to swallow hard.

"That's why I asked Draco to stop by for a moment," Hermione continued, seemingly oblivious to his distress. "I want to spend time with the man I've grown to know through those letters. I think ... I think it's time to let him know how I feel. Face to face."

Severus drew in a deep breath and tried to sound supportive, even though he wanted to tell her it was far too early to even consider such a thing. "Did you tell him? What did he say?"

Hermione looked down the corridor in the direction Draco had disappeared. "I haven't told him yet. It's not just something you blurt out in the hallway, you know?"

Somehow Severus managed to nod in response. If she and Draco hadn't talked, then there might still be time.

Time to do what? Men like me only get the girl in fairy tales. Better her friendship than nothing at all.

She reached out to pat his arm. "Don't look so glum. I'm sure I'll tell him this weekend, when the moment is right. In the meantime, you can come help me figure out what is stuck to the ceiling in my classroom. It's puce and bubbling, and I'm almost positive it tried to move out of the way when I poked it with a stick earlier."

~oOo~

The last essay was graded for the night, the bottle of red ink stoppered, and the various aches and twinges along his spine told Severus that he'd spent far too long hunched over his desk. Carefully, he rolled his neck and stretched his arms above his head, trying to work the kinks out.

A glance toward the clock over the mantel showed that less than five minutes had passed since the last time he'd looked. It was late, but not late enough for Hermione to be home yet, not if Draco had dragged her out to one of those posh restaurants that prided themselves on "ambiance" and clientele rather than appetizing food. Severus had spent more than one excruciatingly long evening out with the Malfoys, longing for a good steak and kidney pie while Lucius droned on with occasional pauses to "savor" his glass of astronomically expensive port.

Another hour. Perhaps two if they don't come straight back to the castle.

Assuming she comes back at all, tonight.

On that pleasant thought, Severus decided that he was done for the day. The little brats were all tucked into their beds, and if they weren't, he didn't really give a flying fuck. The papers were graded, the castle was quiet, and Severus was going to drink himself into a stupor.

Good plan. Bloody brilliant plan, if I do say so myself. But first, a bit of preparation.

Severus extinguished the candles in the room, leaving only the fire for illumination. He arranged his favorite chair in front of the fire, summoned an ottoman for his feet, and placed a crystal goblet and a bottle of elf-made wine on a table within reach. Satisfied that the room met his requirements for comfort, he turned his attention to himself. Teaching robes and frock coat were not conducive to a relaxing night in front of a warm fire. Moments later, he settled into his chair with a sigh, wearing a loose dressing gown and a well-worn pair of sleep pants, his feet bare.

With his first sip of wine, Severus cleared his mind, refusing to think of Hermione or Draco or Hermione ~~and~~ Draco.

His eyes had grown heavy, the wine pleasantly dulling his senses to the point at which he might have dozed off, when the fire flared higher and the flames turned green. He started awake, nearly dropping his glass. His fingers were closing around his wand before he realized it was Hermione's voice coming through the grate.

"Severus? Are you still awake?"

For the brief moment, he considered ignoring her.

He set his glass aside and leaned toward the fireplace, elbows balanced on his knees so he could call out to her. "Yes. Did you need something?"

He could see her in the flames. If she'd worn cosmetics for her evening out, he couldn't tell. Most of her hair was still up in some sort of complicated hairstyle that women tended to favor when they were trying to impress a potential mate, but rogue curls had already managed to escape their confinement.

She was breathtaking.

He saw her look over her shoulder into her room, then turn back to him. "Can I come through?"

Yes! No! Shit.

"It's late, Hermione. Can it wait until morning?"

Another glance over her shoulder. Whatever she saw seemed to make her even more determined. "Now would be best, I think. Please, Severus."

"All right. Come on." He stood, tightening the belt of his dressing gown as he waited for her to step into the room.

He hadn't been expecting her to be dressed for bed. The hem of her pale nightgown peeked out from under the bottom of her blue robe. Her toenails were painted, dark against the white of her skin. He stared at her toes, unable to make out the exact shade of polish in the low light from the fire, and realized he'd missed whatever she said as she brushed her robes clean.

"What was that?"

"I said, 'Thank you.' I hope you don't mind if I stay for a few minutes. Draco's at my door and I just don't want to deal with him any more tonight." She looked around the room and noticed the half-finished bottle of wine. "Oh, may I have some?"

Without thought, Severus retrieved a second goblet and poured some wine for her. Their fingers nearly touched as he offered the goblet to her, and he was absurdly disappointed that they did not. He gestured toward the sofa for her to sit, then returned to his own chair.

Severus waited until she'd made herself comfortable...feet tucked up beside her and covered by the edge of her robe...and she'd had a sip of wine before asking why she was hiding from Draco.

Hermione sighed and rolled her neck as if trying to alleviate some of the tension in it. Another large curl fell free and brushed against her shoulder. "Well, things started out well enough, I suppose. He took me to a lovely restaurant, very pretty. Lots of beautiful people. I'm glad I'd thought to wear my good heels, even though they kill my feet. Anyway, we talked as the meal progressed and ..."

She paused to take another sip of wine. "To make a long story short...well, shortish at any rate...at some point over the cheese course, Draco kissed me."

Judging from the involuntary spasms going on around his right eye, Severus suspected he was in danger of developing a facial tic.

"He kissed you, and it was bad enough to drive you into hiding?" Though his tone was light and teasing, Severus was anything but.

"The kiss itself wasn't bad; it's what happened after. There we were, his lips on mine, barely even touching really, and then there was this awful screech. We both jerked

back in time to see this woman storming through the restaurant...she really was quite beautiful. Lovely dress." Another sip of wine.

She was trying to drive him mad; she had to be. Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The point, Hermione, please try to come to it sometime soon."

"Fine. Apparently, she was Draco's not-too-distant ex, and she was rather unhappy to spot him swapping spit with another at 'their' restaurant. You think I was embarrassed by the stink she was making, you should have seen *her* date."

Severus blinked, his mind latching on to one phrase and refusing to let it go. "Did you honestly just say 'swapping spit?'"

She blushed deep enough that he could see it even in the low light. "I may have slightly understated the kiss, but it was really not a big deal. Just a tiny bit of tongue on his part, truly."

He stood, the wine in his stomach threatening to stage a revolt, and moved deeper into the shadows behind his chair. "Feel free to refrain from sharing any further details that involve bodily fluids, please."

"As you can imagine, at that point, I was pretty much done with supper. However, she wasn't done giving Draco a piece of her mind. I admit, I took the cowardly way out, and as soon as I saw an opening to escape, I ran for it."

"Of course you did. It's what any sane person would have done, I'm sure." Severus gripped the back of his chair in both hands until his knuckles turned white. "And now Draco is in the castle, wanting to pick up where you left off, no doubt?"

She looked thoughtful, then shrugged. "Something like that, I suppose. To be honest, I was planning to cut the evening short before all that started. I wanted to come back to the castle. You see, there was something that I needed to..."

Several rapid knocks interrupted her, and both heads swiveled to stare at the door to his sitting room.

"Are you expecting company?" whispered Hermione.

"Do I look like I was expecting visitors?" Severus hissed right back.

After a brief pause, the knocking started up again, this time accompanied by Draco's voice demanding to be let in.

"Annoying little scrotum," Hermione muttered under her breath, which, perversely, seemed to brighten Severus' mood a tad. She looked at him, all impossibly wide eyed and desperate, and Severus suspected he was about to do something phenomenally stupid.

With a sigh, he hurriedly ushered her toward the bedroom. Without even glancing into the darkened room...he was aware of the state he'd left it in, the day's clothes tossed haphazardly on the floor, boots sticking out from under the bed...Severus gently pushed her in and closed the door.

First, he cast a quick Imperturbable Charm at the bedroom door because who knew what sort of nonsense Draco was going to attempt to demand of him this time. Another flick of his wand had her goblet rushing toward his hand, and he drained the last of the contents before shoving it into the liquor cabinet and out of sight.

Then, once he was sure the sitting room held no more evidence that Hermione had been there that night, Severus put on his most menacing "you have done a Bad Thing and now you must be punished" face and jerked open the door.

Draco nearly fell into the room.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Severus thundered. Not that he had any clue, himself, other than "very late."

"Have you seen Hermione tonight?" Draco didn't even have the decency to look the tiniest bit intimidated. Severus noted that the blond's hair was mussed and he had a vibrant red smudge on his collar.

"I thought she was spending the evening with you?" He casually leaned against the wall with his arms crossed and watched Draco pace around the space between his desk and the sitting area near the fireplace.

"She was, but then she left. I tried her room, but she didn't answer."

"You must have done something to cause her to leave you in the lurch and avoid you. Did you offer to show her your broom collection?"

"What? No, I...those brooms are highly valuable collectables!" Draco wasn't distracted for long. "Everything was fine, I thought. She wasn't terribly talkative, but I had several anecdotes to share, and she found them amusing enough. Then, as I was reaching for the *Camembert de Normandie*, she told me she wasn't sure we were right for each other."

That caught his attention. "I'm sorry. She what?"

"I know!" Draco threw his hands up in the air. "She kept on about needing more than just sexual attraction, that we didn't have the connection she needed. What's so wrong with sexual attraction is what I want to know?"

Severus was still trying understand what Hermione was playing at, making it very clear to him that she was falling for Draco, then turning around and telling Draco she wasn't interested. He let Draco whinge while he tried to work out the puzzle in his mind.

Eventually, he noticed that Draco had come to a standstill and was obviously waiting for a response from him. "You're absolutely right." He had no idea what he'd just agreed to, but it seemed to appease the younger man.

"So, then I kissed her. I think I was well on my way to convincing her to give us a chance...she seemed to be gaining enthusiasm for the idea, if you know what I mean...when Astoria popped up from nowhere." Draco began to pace again.

"How dare she get upset with me for taking Hermione there! That restaurant has been a favorite of my family for decades, long before we were even a couple! If anyone should have been ashamed to show their face there, it should have been her and that hulking buffoon she had following her around. I'm almost positive he had some troll in his bloodline."

The tic was back. Severus made a mental note to talk to Poppy in the morning.

"Troll boy tried to interrupt us at one point, but Astoria told him to toddle off back to his cave. Then the owner politely suggested that we take our disagreement to one of his private rooms, and by that time, Hermione was gone."

It truly was late, the pleasant elf-made wine-induced fog had evaporated long ago, and Severus was tired. Very, very tired.

He pointed to the stain on Draco's collar. "I'm going to hazard a guess that that is not Professor Granger's lipstick?"

"That is not the point, Severus," snapped Draco. "I need to speak with her, to explain what happened. If she's not in her room, and not here, where else would she have gone? Where does Potter live? She wouldn't go to the Weasel, would she?"

"Take this small bit of advice, Draco. Do not go to Weasley or Potter's home this evening, pounding on their doors like you did mine, demanding to speak with Professor Granger. If she is with one of them, and not safely tucked into her own bed, fast asleep, you will end up flat on your back with a wand digging into your neck before you can even draw your next breath. Neither of those two take kindly to seeing their friend upset. Nor, I imagine, to being woken up in the middle of the night by a nattering idiot." Severus pulled the door open and gestured toward the corridor outside. "Go home. Send her a note in the morning. Or don't. I do not care at this point; I just want to go to bed. Get. Out."

Thankfully, Draco did as requested, pouting the entire way.

Severus locked the door, then leaned his forehead against the cool wood as he debated what to do with the woman hiding in his bedroom.

He could just leave her there and find somewhere else to sleep. Filius would probably give him shelter if Severus asked.

Only the thought of the potentially crippling backache that would result from a night spent on the tiny professor's equally tiny sofa kept him from seriously considering it.

He straightened up, smoothed down his disheveled hair, and squared his shoulders, readying himself for battle.

What he wasn't expecting, when the door opened to let enough light into the room for him to make out shapes, was to see the large lump huddled under the covers on his bed.

"Hermione?" For some reason her name came out as a whisper.

Severus crept closer on silent feet. "Hermione." His voice was a little firmer, a little louder now.

No answer. Not even a twitch from the lump on the bed.

"Lumos."

In the soft wash of light from his wand, Severus was able to confirm that she had tucked herself in and was fast asleep.

Not quite the way he'd dreamt of finding her in his bed. She certainly hadn't been snoring in his imagination, although he had to admit the soft huffing noises she was making might not be classified as snores in the strictest of senses.

Still, the fact remained that he was knackered, practically swaying on his feet, and she was smack dab in the middle of his mattress.

"Hermione."

She moved slightly, and he thought he saw the glint of her eyes peeking over the edge of the blanket.

"Draco's gone."

"Fabulous," she mumbled, half asleep. Hermione shifted away from him, and he thought she was going to get up on the other side, but she simply cuddled into the pillow and closed her eyes again. "Turn the light off and come to bed."

That's when he realized she had moved over to make room for him. She actually expected him to crawl into bed with her.

Was she out of her mind? Was he?

Severus had done many things he later regretted in life, and this was probably going to be one of them, but that did not stop him from whispering *Nox*, and setting his wand on the nightstand. He took off his dressing robe and draped it across the foot of the bed, then slid under the covers, leaving a respectable distance between himself and Hermione.

Her breathing had almost evened out when his last bit of doubt hit. "Hermione, are you..."

Suddenly, there were feminine fingers pressed against his lips, silencing him. Then warm breath against his ear. "Shh. No more talk. Sleeping time now. Talk in the morning."

The fingers on his lips slid lower until her hand settled against his chest, not far from his heart. His own hand came up to cover hers, and Severus let himself drift off to sleep.

~oOo~

Sunlight filtered through the enchanted window, brightening the room just enough to rouse him. He took a deep breath and felt a warm weight across his chest. Severus' eyes popped open, and his head turned to find Hermione already awake and watching him from her pillow.

"Morning."

"Good morning," he managed to reply as if they were greeting each other at the High Table over breakfast instead of in his bed.

Breakfast. That could be a good excuse for getting up. And dressed. And not mentally calculating the distance between them and wondering if she would notice if he began shifting toward her direction.

The more he thought about it, the more getting dressed seemed like a brilliantly fantastic idea.

"He's in love with her, you know."

That was a non sequitur if he'd ever heard one. "Who?"

"Draco." She sat up, adjusting her pillow behind her so she could lean against the headboard. "He's in love with what's-her-name."

"Astoria. Astoria Greengrass." He didn't like the feeling of having to look up at her. Severus sat up as well, tucking the blanket across his chest and under his arms for warmth. The fire had died out long ago, and the dungeons remained cool year-round.

"Is that her name? She's very pretty."

She didn't sound upset. Severus never claimed to be an expert on women, far from it, but shouldn't she be upset?

"There were rumors that they would marry one day before they split up. You're taking this rather well. Surprisingly well, actually." He couldn't help but be suspicious.

"That's because I already figured out he didn't really want to be with me. Oh, he wouldn't have been opposed to having sex, I'm sure. But he didn't really care about me."

How was he supposed to respond to that? If he confirmed that she was right, would he be violating the agreement he'd made with Lucius? He'd be lying if he told her she was wrong; he knew for a fact Draco had only started pursuing her to make his father happy.

Hermione dropped her gaze to her hands, tangled together on her lap. "Not like the man who wrote me those letters does. At least, I hope he does."

Severus felt as if someone had cast a Stunner straight at his chest. "Draco..."

"Didn't write the letters." She lifted her head and gave him a tentative smile. "But I think we both know who did."

So many words were trying to force their way past his lips, and none of them seemed adequate. Was this the moment when it all ended? Or, his foolish heart insisted, could this be the beginning? She had said that she hoped the author cared about her. If she thought...knew...that he was the one ...

She must have been able to see something of the terror he was feeling in his expression because her smile began to wilt. "Unless...have I been mistaken? Were they just words to you?"

Hermione looked as if she were going to be sick. She drew the covers back and started to crawl out of bed before Severus' hand on her arm stopped her.

"I meant every word."

Suddenly his arms were full of Hermione, her unexpected weight nearly tipping them both over the side of the bed. He could feel her lips against his cheek, his jaw, and finally, finally, against his own lips.

At first he was content just to have her in his arms, to be allowed to rub his cheek against her absurd hair, to smell her scent; but then their tentative kisses, formerly chaste and brief, began to linger.

One of them, probably him, although he couldn't be positive it wasn't her, parted their lips, and his world shifted.

Long moments passed with only their soft murmurs and hums in the air, interspersed with the slight rasp of long fingers tangling in curls. As tempting as it was to try to take things a step or two further, Severus didn't want to ruin the moment by asking for more than Hermione was comfortable with. Besides, there were still things he didn't understand, questions that needed to be asked.

He kissed her one last time, then drew back so that he could see her face. "How did you know?"

Hermione smiled. "I had my suspicions from the start. The handwriting, you see."

Of course. It was just like her to pick up on something like that.

"You didn't say anything."

"I wasn't certain. I'd just received this beautiful letter, telling me the sorts of things I'd wanted to hear for so long. Even you have to admit, that's not exactly your style. What if I was wrong? You would have laughed in my face."

Severus wanted to deny it, but there was every chance that she wasn't far off the mark. "Probably not in your face. Nearby, but not directly in your face."

"That's ... less reassuring than you might think." She giggled softly, then leaned against his chest, tucking her head under his chin. "Then there was the way you ended the letter. Your Admirer? Just a day after I'd confided how much I wanted to be admired? The timing could have been a coincidence, but it still seemed ... significant somehow."

"When were you certain?"

"Honestly? Just a bit ago when you told me you'd meant what you wrote. However, I was almost convinced I was right when you kissed my hand in the hall the day Draco visited. It felt ... it felt like the first time I ever cast a spell, like I had ball lightning at my fingertips. I knew that even if Draco had been the one writing the letters, he wasn't the one I wanted." She cuddled closer, and Severus wrapped his arms around her even tighter.

"Yet you let him kiss you last night, despite that," he growled.

"Well, there was still that tiny little bit of doubt." Hermione pushed away from his chest and lifted her face closer to his. "Would it make you feel better if I said that kissing him did nothing for me?"

"It doesn't hurt," he grumpily conceded.

"What if I told you it was horrible, and something I never wished to repeat in my entire life? Utterly disgusting. Horrific. His breath smelled of moldy cheese and cabbage. I may have thrown up a little."

Severus scowled. "Now I know you're lying."

Her answering smile was almost infectious. He very nearly caught himself returning it.

"Of course I am. Not about it doing nothing for me; it really didn't. But all the rest ... blatantly untrue. He's skilled enough, but there was no real passion." Hermione looked at his lips in a way that made his blood warm. "Not like when you kiss me."

He started to lean closer, intent on doing just that, but she shook her head. "I've been blathering on for awhile now, but I would feel better if I made it clear that I think I've fallen in love with you. I just wanted to get that out in the open."

Now it was his turn to stop her from instigating a kiss. "You tell me you think you love me, and you don't even want to know if I feel the same?" What kind of a man did she take him for?

"I figured you'd tell me when you were ready. Are you going to kiss me now, or what?"

He did.

~oOo~

Pomona flipped through her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, eagerly skipping to the society pages in search of the latest scandals.

"Oh, Severus, look at this! Draco Malfoy got married! You're still friends with the family, aren't you? Isn't that exciting? Look, Aurora, it's that sweet young Greengrass girl. They eloped! Don't they make a handsome couple?"

Severus managed to drown out her incessant chattering, turning his attention to the fluttering activity near the ceiling.

The nondescript school owl was easily lost amongst the parliament of owls that were still delivering the morning mail, but Severus had been tracking it from the moment it flew into the Great Hall.

It swooped toward the High Table, dropping a letter next to the plate of the Potions mistress.

Severus watched out of the corner of his eye as she picked it up and examined the black wax seal that bore the image of two S's, entwined. She broke the seal and

withdrew the folded parchment.

My dearest Hermione,

Someone once told me that I had a way with words, yet there are times when I try to tell you how much you mean to me and my voice remains silent.

Do you remember that first letter, sent nearly a year ago? I remember telling you that the man who wrote it was trying to tell you things he couldn't bring himself to say in person.

This past year, I've tried to show you how I felt in the things I did, the way I held you, kissed you, rubbed your sore feet, procured untold amounts of Curly Wurlys, let you drag me to Potter's wedding with only a mild protest, and more.

I've done everything save say the words.

You've told me, many times, that you know how I feel. That you don't need to hear it to know it's true.

But I want to tell you.

Now.

He waited until she raised her head to lean close enough to whisper in her ear.

"I love you. For now and forevermore, I will admire and love you until our dying days. Will you marry me?"

He chose to take her stunned silence as a good sign. Luckily, he was rewarded for his rare moment of optimism when she smiled.

"Yes. How could there be any doubt?" She leaned over and kissed him, ignoring all the stunned Hufflepuffs who had been innocently eating their breakfasts.

"You know they'll be talking about that for the rest of the year," Severus grumbled, although he hadn't made a move to discourage her.

"Just wait until they hear we're engaged, and their little heads start to explode once they realize that means we're probably having sex. With each other, even."

It wasn't just the Hufflepuffs that looked traumatized as Severus' laughter filled the Great Hall.

~The End~