

The Gentleman Bettor

by Meladara

Bound by the rules of magical society into performing a forfeit, despite the fact the Lucius clearly cheated in order to win the bet, Severus learns that sometimes it can pay to lose. However, that doesn't mean that revenge is off the table.

Oh! The Whims of the Malfoys

Chapter 1 of 3

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A/N: This fic was originally written for the Bringing Back the Bastard Fest at the Deeply Horrible community on livejournal. This community's goal is to showcase and preserve the more unsavory sides of Severus Snape. Please keep that in mind as you read this fic. :) Thank you for reading and reviewing! ~Meladara~

Muchas gracias to Laralee and Sixpence Jones for betaing! You two know I think the world of you!

Oh! The Whims of the Malfoys

"A Gentleman is a man who will pay his gambling debts even when he knows he has been cheated." Leo Tolstoy

~oOOOo~

Severus Snape's eyes narrowed, his hands tightening their grip on his whiskey glass as he listened to his friend. He could not believe the nerve of the blond man. Yes, he was one of his oldest and closest friends, but that did not mean he could force him into such debasing activities as blind dates! The gall. Severus continued to rant in his mind as his eyes glazed over, unseeing. His companion elegantly sipped brandy while studying Severus from his chair. Just as Severus had moved on to creating increasingly horrifying ways to get back at the man for this outrage, a voice broke through his thoughts.

"Severus, are you even listening to me?" Lucius asked impatiently.

Black eyes once again focused on grey. The angry glint found in the dark orbs would have been enough to steal breath from a lesser man, but Lucius had been dealing with the many moods of Severus Snape long enough to know how to handle the situation.

"Ah, good. I see I have once again captured your attention," Lucius drawled casually. "Now, you shall meet your date a**Epine Noire** on Christmas Eve at eight o'clock in the evening." He continued on, ignoring the lack of response and steely gaze of his friend. Lucius knew he was listening and catching every detail; Severus had no choice but to do so. "No need to worry about how to identify her; Gustave will know who she is and will lead you to her table when you arrive. All I ask is that you behave and... Just be yourself, Severus. For too many years we have watched you lurk in the shadows. You deserve happiness. We sincerely believe that your date would be a good match for you."

The only response Lucius received was a further tightening of the glare. It was, if at all possible, even more vicious than it had been only moments before. His friend let out a grunt of acknowledgment before slamming down his glass and storming from the room.

As a wicked smile started to stretch across Lucius' face, he wished he could be a fly on the wall when his dear friend met his date this Saturday. Though he did truly believe that she would be a good match for his old friend, he knew that the history between them would make it impossible for his friend to see her as such. It would serve him right for betting against Lucius Malfoy.

~oOOOo~

Hermione Granger struggled through the door of her flat with bag- and package-laden arms. She had spent the afternoon shopping for last-minute Christmas gifts and was very happy to have made it back into the comfort of her home.

Kicking the door closed behind her, she wearily settled her bundles on the small kitchen table and began to peel off her many layers of damp clothing. When she had removed her thick winter coat and outer jumper, she turned to make herself a much-needed pot of tea. Turning on the kettle, she set out the tea things and then slumped back into the chair with relief.

It was an unusually cold winter; the streets were thick with snow, and the icy wind that stung against her small amount of exposed flesh had made what had been an unpleasant outing absolutely miserable. In fact, it had been due to the frigid weather that she hadn't finished her shopping earlier. Normally, she completed her shopping weeks in advance, each gift carefully selected for each person, but between working nonstop at the charity and the dreadful weather, she'd had neither the time nor energy to even think of purchasing Christmas gifts. However, Christmas was now only three days away. No longer able to put it off, she was forced to brave both the crowds and the snow to get her last-minute shopping done.

The singing of the kettle startled her from the dazed contemplation of her day of shopping. With what little energy she could muster, Hermione pushed herself up from her chair with a sigh and began to prepare the tea. Just as she settled back into her chair, the small tea tray sat before her in a hastily cleared spot on the table, a tapping sounded at the window. Seeing an owl fluttering just outside, she flicked her wand and the window flew open. A bluster of snow followed the tawny owl into the flat as it flew toward her. Hermione eyed the snow with irritation as the chill of the winter air rushed into the room. Flicking her wand once again, the window snapped shut, and as the owl landed, it looked from the tired woman to the window and then let out a confused hoot.

"Oh, hush, Cira. I'll open it again when you are ready to leave," Hermione chided. Reaching up, she scratched the owl fondly. "It isn't like you honestly want to go back out in this weather. It is positively arctic out there. I can't imagine what Narcissa thought was important enough to send you out in such weather. She could have just Flooded me, after all." Again the owl hooted, and then, putting out its leg, it offered up a missive to Hermione.

With a roll of her eyes, she untied the note while clicking her tongue gently at the owl. "Silly girl. I know you can handle the weather and are excellent at doing your job. No need to get stropopy. Now, how about we get you a little treat before you go?"

Again she flicked her wand, this time causing a small jar of owl treats to float across the room to land on the table. Reaching in, she pulled out a small handful and offered them to Cira. As the owl pecked delicately at the treats, Hermione ran her fingers over the owl's soft feathers.

"All right, Cira. You ready to go?" she asked when the owl finished. Hermione knew that Cira, like all Malfoy owls, was serious about her job and would not stick around for further coddling, no matter what the weather. The owl responded with a hoot and turned toward the window through which she had entered.

"Have a safe flight, dear girl," Hermione said as she magicked the window open, and the owl glided back out into the winter weather.

Once the window fully closed behind the owl and the latest bluster of snow had settled upon the sill, Hermione turned back to her tea and missive. Opting to prepare herself a cup first, she set aside the letter. When she had the piping hot tea in hand, Hermione allowed herself to relax further on her chair and slipped off her shoes. It had been a long day, and sitting down with a cup of tea was just what she needed. Wrapping her fingers around the cup, the heat seeped through her hands. Slowly, she took soothing sips and allowed the cold chill of the day to slip from her. Then, when she finally felt herself fully content and warm, she reached for the missive and settled in to see what Narcissa had to say.

It was an odd friendship, the one existing between Hermione Granger and Narcissa Malfoy. They had first formally met at a post-war charity to benefit war orphans. Hermione was on the board of a newly opened Wizarding orphanage, and Narcissa was one of the primary contributors to the charity. They had worked together planning an outing for the seventeen children receiving benefits through the charity a few months later and had immediately formed a sincere, if cautious, friendship. That had been four years ago. Since that time, they had worked on numerous other charity events, and their friendship had only grown. Then, this past summer, Narcissa had invited Hermione to holiday with her at a French chateau while Mr. Malfoy was away on a business trip. Hermione had been hesitant to accept at first, but as it had been clear to her that Narcissa was sincere in her desire for companionship, she had decided to go. The two had spent a lovely week together. Hermione had happily explored hidden bookstores, while Narcissa had revelled in gently introducing the young woman to the world of high fashion. Hermione had never known that shopping could be such fun, and the two had parted ways fast friends.

Hermione took a final sip of tea and then sat the cup aside in order to pay full attention to the letter.

December 23, 2003

Hermione,

I know that I may be stepping past the bounds of our friendship; however, it has become apparent that you, my dear companion, have fallen into a disturbingly unhealthy way of life. I do not wish to see you live your life out alone and over-worked. You are young and vibrantly beautiful, and so often you forget that fact. I am very much aware of the hours you are putting in at Nym's House as of late. I have spies everywhere, and working as much as you are is not healthy.

As such, you will report, dressed in your winter's finest, to Epine Noire at 7:50 on the evening of Christmas Eve. Your date, I assure you, will be of the highest quality, both in manners, dress, and mind. Do arrive at your appointed time; he will be arriving at eight o'clock. I am sure that you will, if nothing else, have a nice time plotting ways to get back at meddlesome friends.

And please, do not be so daft as to try to wheedle your way out of this. I know you have nothing planned, as you told me yourself that your parents were visiting Switzerland this Christmas and that the Weasley Family Christmas held no appeal as it would include your former beau and his latest tart. I will not hesitate to hunt you down and Apparate you to the restaurant myself if you choose to ignore the invitation.

Until I see you again.

Yours,

Narcissa Malfoy

PS: Please, do not forget that you have promised to attend my Christmas Ball. I will send over Linky, as promised, on Christmas day. ~N.

Hermione was stunned. Not about the ball, of course, she had argued long and hard with Narcissa about attending but as usual had lost. That Narcissa would force her into a date was what had her reeling. As the letter fell from her fingers, she let out a deep sigh of dread. It wasn't like she didn't enjoy the occasional date, but a blind date set up by a meddling socialite was not very appealing. She and Ronald Weasley had ended their relationship the year before, and Hermione had been fodder for the tabloids ever since. Yes, she hadn't gone out much of late, and the hours she was putting in at Nym's House were long, but there was nothing wrong with devoting one's time to

making the lives of the children living there better. And really, who could blame her? Every time she had gone out with anyone of the opposite sex, the *Daily Prophet* had them married with three kids and a country cottage by morning. It was for that reason alone that she had avoided being seen in public with anyone other than Ginny, Harry, or Narcissa for the last three months.

Still, at least Narcissa had shown enough foresight to arrange for the date to occur at *Epine Noire*. The restaurant was famous for its discretion and exclusivity. If she went, then the date would, at the very least, manage to stay out of the headlines.

Hermione quickly stood from the table and walked over to the window. Watching the snow bluster and swirl outside, she felt the familiar weight of anxiety settle on her. She hated this. Hermione was very aware that Narcissa was right about her isolating herself; she had hidden herself away. But it hurt to continually have the paper speculating about her life, building castles in the clouds for her each week, only to mock and tear them down the next. The week this past summer in France had been a welcome respite from the stress of her public life. It had been a long time since she had felt so happy. She knew that Narcissa really was simply looking out for her well-being and wanted to give her a chance to unwind in a place that she could be assured of her privacy.

It was then that Hermione knew she would go. *Why not?* she asked herself as she walked purposefully back to the table and began gathering up the packages from the table.

Narcissa was an excellent judge of character, and if she had chosen someone for her to spend the evening with, then Hermione knew she could be assured he wouldn't be a bumbling idiot. With her decision made, Hermione walked down the hall to her bedroom with arms full. If she was going on a date at *Epine Noire* the following evening, she needed to start getting things ready now.

~oOOOo~

Severus looked down at the letter in his hand and read it again.

December 23, 2003

Severus,

I understand that you have been forced into this; Lucius made clear to me the terms of your forfeit. However, it concerns me that you, in your typical irritating manner, will take out your frustration on your date. So, I have taken it upon myself to make a couple of things clear.

First, your date is a kind young woman, who is intelligent and holds you in the highest regard. And though she does not know your identity, I do know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she will treat you with the utmost respect. Please return the favour.

Second, your date knows nothing of your silly bet, and it should stay that way. She does not need to know that you were idiotic enough to get yourself involved in a vow-bound bet and lose! Lucius refuses to disclose to me the nature of the bet, and given that fact, I have not pressed the issue further. But let me just say, you asked for it and thus must pay the price. The price at this time is to behave. Please do so.

Third, if I find out that you were so uncouth as to upset your date or behave in a manner that is anything but gentlemanly, I will personally see to it that your life is made into your own personal hell. I hear that due to your upcoming negotiations with her father, Prudence Parkinson has once again been asking after you, and I have no qualms about encouraging her to seek you out at the Christmas Ball if you step out of line. Do not tempt me.

Best wishes for a lovely Yuletide, Severus.

Your sincere friend,

Narcissa Malfoy

"Damn it," he spat as he crumpled the letter and threw it into the fire. He couldn't believe the pair of them, meddling in his life and then forcing him into civility with the ninny they had set him up with. There was no doubt in his mind that she would be a ninny. They always were.

This was not the first time that Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had steamrolled him. In fact, it was becoming a time-honoured tradition for them to force him into humiliating engagements, the Christmas Ball being a very good example. Worst of all, Severus knew that this time Lucius had cheated. He'd hoped that, just this once, he would be able to get one over on the slippery man, but no, once again he had come out the loser. The binding magic of the bet allowed no room for challenging the validity of the win in the face of Slytherin tactics, though he was sure Lucius had used as many questionable tactics as he could to achieve this victory.

No matter, he had played nice for Narcissa plenty of times before, and there was no way he was going to risk Narcissa setting her dogs after him. There was a very good reason Prudence Parkinson was still single: she was a trollish woman with poor hygiene and little brains. He wasn't interested in touching that woman with a ten-foot pole. If all it took to fulfill the forfeit and get Narcissa off his back was one evening of dinner, then he would grit his teeth and bear it. Though, to be sure, he would find a way to pay them back as soon as possible.

~oOOOo~

Drive Each to Surprise

Chapter 2 of 3

Bound by the rules of magical society into performing a forfeit, despite the fact the Lucius clearly cheated in order to win the bet, Severus learns that sometimes it can pay to lose. However, that doesn't mean that revenge is off the table.

*A/N: Much love and many thanks for the reviews! To Laralee and Sixpence Jones, for betaing for me and for general all around awesomeness: *massive hugs**

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Chapter Two Drive Each to Surprise

"A Gentleman is a man who will pay his gambling debts even when he knows he has been cheated." Leo Tolstoy

~oOOOo~

The snow was blowing down in swirls and spirals that caught Severus' cloak. The fabric whipped around him in wild flutters as he made his way from the nearest Apparation point toward his destination. Ahead, he could just make out small, glowing windows, a shining beacon in the sea of white. Thinking of the warmth that lay beyond the glass, he suppressed a shiver as he quickened his snow-muffled steps. An icy swirl of snow spun before him and blew into his face and along his neck. He paused his progress and muttered a quiet warming charm as he squinted through the white haze that temporarily shrouded his vision. Then as he scanned the distance intently for a moment, the light of the restaurant window once again became clear, and he continued resolutely on. He knew that if he was to have any hope of getting through this evening civilly, then he needed to get out of this blizzard as quickly as possible. Contrary to popular belief, Severus Snape hated the cold.

~oOOOo~

Hermione sat at a small table, tucked into an intimate, secluded alcove of *Epine Noire*. Dressing with particular care, she had managed to arrive at the restaurant exactly on time for her date, looking the picture of beauty. Sitting in a form-fitting green dress, she took delicate sips from a wine glass as her eyes idly gazed around the room.

From the small alcove, she could not see any of the other guests, not that she really cared to anyway. Hermione was well aware that the privacy charms protected each of the tables from the intrusive eyes of onlookers. All that she could make out around the room was the deep, dark wood of the walls and the glow of the candles floating hauntingly above each table. Strange, exotic music drifted across the space at just the right level to allow for conversation while still wrapping each table in a blanket of intimacy. She knew that her date would be arriving any moment and was doing her best to keep as calm and composed as possible. Hermione wasn't sure who she had been set up with, but she had every hope that Narcissa knew her well enough to make a good guess as to which sort of man could capture her interest.

The light spilling from the foyer of the restaurant flickered as a patron entered. The movement of a shadow obstructing the flow of light drew the attention of the watching woman. The new guest, who Hermione knew would most likely be her date, paused for a moment and shuffled with his clothing.

Removing his coat, Hermione thought as she continued to watch.

When the man emerged from the room accompanied by the maître d', the two spoke in quiet tones in the dim light of the restaurant, and then, after the maître d' nodded, they began to make their way across the room. Hermione squinted but could not make out the features of the new man. For a moment she was disappointed that the privacy charms would preserve his anonymity until he arrived at his table. It would have been nice to get a glimpse of her date, if this was him, before he got to her. What she could tell was that he was a tall, lean man with a quick, determined step. Though his clothes, too, were obscured, she could see that he was dressed in dark colours. When it became clear that they were indeed heading to her table, she took a final sip of wine and quickly composed herself for the coming evening.

~oOOOo~

Severus followed behind Gustave, scanning ahead for his date. The privacy charms of this blasted place were both a blessing and curse. He did appreciate that he could eat without the intrusive looks of former enemies and pupils, but the fact that he couldn't get a clear vision of his date disconcerted the spy in him.

As he neared the table, Gustave stopped and turned back to face him. Then, drawing his wand from a hidden pocket, the old man said, "If it pleases, sir, I will now add you to the charm for this table. It is for your privacy, of course. You and your dining companion shall be visible only to one another while sitting at this table or in physical contact within these walls. All charms placed upon you are set to terminate upon your re-entering the foyer of our establishment. Do you agree?"

Severus nodded curtly and felt the magic wash over him. Then, as Gustave nodded and faded into the back ground of the restaurant, the table before him shifted and then crystallized into clarity. His eyes, at first, simply adjusted to the newly clear surroundings, but after a second, they settled upon the woman sitting at the table and took in each small detail about her. First, he took in the tight green dress that accentuated her body in a most flattering manner and the exacting posture with which she sat in her chair. Her breasts, while modestly covered, were alluringly evident.

His eyes grazed over the turn of her waist, absently noting that it indicated a healthy body full of womanly curves. Approving of the lush form of her body and poised nature, he moved on with his examination. His eyes grazed over her hands, which had just set her wine glass upon the table. They were small and delicate.

She seems to be a small but well-made creature, he thought as his eyes continued on to her face.

For a quick moment, his eyes lit upon her pink lips, which were currently showcasing a small smile that quirked to one side. They were fresh, plump, and surely soft, and though he wouldn't mind contemplating the many things the lips could do, he did not linger there. Instead, he chose to move on to her eyes and hair. Her hair was pulled back into a wild, twisted knot. Negligent curls framed her face and brushed against the skin of her neck, just asking to be pushed aside in pursuit of the flesh hidden beneath. Her eyes were a deep cinnamon, and they washed over him in warm waves that were full of vibrant life. He began to step forward as the woman took in a deep breath and simultaneously moved to stand in order to properly greet him.

~oOOOo~

As he was spelled into the charm of the table, Hermione watched the shape of her date shimmer and shift into a fit and decidedly attractive form of a man. He wore expensive clothing that was clearly tailored to fit him and probably cost a small fortune. His hands, which hung casually at his side, had long, lean fingers. They looked to be rough and strong, as if this man used his hands each day in physical tasks that marked him. Hermione felt a small jolt run through her; this man worked for his living. She could not abide those who idled away their life, resting on laurels. A small quirk of approval lit up her face, and she moved on with her perusal. He was very tall and had dark hair that was pulled back into a queue. His skin, which was flush from the cold, was rather pale but not so much that it looked sickly. Wanting to greet him properly, she began to slide her legs to the side of her chair in order to stand, and that was when their eyes met.

Recognition and horror flooded the pair of them instantly as he froze mid-step, and she sat down hard in her chair, full of shock.

Fuck, Hermione thought as she realised exactly who was standing before her. She had been ogling her former professor, her very handsome bastard of a former professor.

"Fuck," Severus said bitterly under his breath, unknowingly echoing her unspoken curse. His jaw clenched in frustration as his eyes narrowed in annoyance. It would be just his luck that Lucius would pick one of the most beautiful and undoubtedly intelligent witches around while still ensuring that she would be absolutely unsuitable. There was no way he could ever be interested in the Princess of the Gryffindor trio, and Lucius knew it.

He growled out, his voice raw and feral, "Ms Granger."

Hermione startled at the sound of his voice as thousands of memories flooded her. The long-forgotten drawl of his acidic tones brought to the forefront of her mind the image of her intolerant Potions professor. Her heart began to race, causing her stomach to churn nervously. What had Narcissa thrown her into?

Gulping audibly, she returned in as quiet and calm a voice as she could manage, "Professor Snape."

~oOOOo~

In Losing He Wins

Chapter 3 of 3

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~oOOOo~

Severus glared down at the petite woman as the feeling of absolute irritation coursed through him. He couldn't exactly pinpoint what it was about her that drove him to such immediate vexation, but he thought that perhaps it was the fact that she was looking up at him with nervous, doe-like eyes, or it could have been the blanching of her cheeks and the quickening of her breath that was causing his temperament to deteriorate. Nevertheless, whatever it was, he stood looking down at his former student with one thought clear in his mind: she was just too skittish to be borne. However, it wasn't until she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and began to nibble, as if she were an insipid school girl waiting to be scolded, that he let out the low growl that had been building in his chest. It rumbled from his throat as he loomed over her.

"Am I to take it that *you* are my... *date*?" He bit out the words harshly, the final of which coming out as if it left a bad taste in his mouth.

For a moment, Hermione sat in stunned silent before she found herself answering in a quiet, brittle voice. "As you see."

"Far be it from me to disagree with our dear friends, Ms Granger," he said as his eyes flashed viciously at her, "but they seem to have deluded themselves into believing that we would make good companions, though I am at a lost as to how they ever could have come to such a ridiculous conclusion. It is well known that I refuse to deal with fidgety fools who lack spines."

Hermione felt her breath leave her in a sudden whoosh, the shock of his statement and the sheer callousness of his tone acting as a vacuum in her chest. Tears began to prick at her eyes, but she quickly pushed them down. She was stronger than this and certainly didn't have to take such treatment from Severus Snape.

Actually, she thought as she quickly composed her face, *I know just how to deal with bastards like this* Goodness knows she had come across more than a few in her day. The only reason she had reacted with such initial surprise and hurt was that she had been anticipating a friendly encounter. Which, after all, was a reasonable expectation from one's date; however, she knew better now.

With eyes tightening, Hermione straightened herself in her chair and with slow controlled movements she picked up her wine glass. Intently, she gazed at the man, her eyes raking over him in icy sweeps that had, in the past, silenced even the worst of her verbal attackers.

Severus watched as she pulled herself up, clothing herself in a calm and stoic façade that was betrayed only by the fiery glint was growing in her eyes. He knew exactly what she was trying to do. After all, he had perfected that look decades ago. There was no way he was about to be quelled by Hermione Granger. He had half a mind to turn around and march out right then and there, but he knew he could not. Remaining silent, he chose to watch as she took a sip of wine in a deliberately casual manner. It was her move, as far as he was concerned.

"Well, Mr Snape," she said with a click of her tongue, the distaste clear in her haughty tone. "I am sorry that you have such an affliction, though it would seem that you have chosen your line of work rather poorly, given that you deal with fidgety fools on a daily basis as a result of it. Furthermore, that particular fact can only lead me to assume that you either secretly enjoy the behaviour, though you profess otherwise, or that you have quite the masochistic streak. For what it is worth, I am inclined to believe the latter."

Severus rolled his eyes. She was doing nothing to endear herself to him; in fact, the swotty, holier-than-thou tone was only serving to irritate him further.

"As for myself," she continued, choosing to ignore the growing ire that was apparent on his face, "I am neither a fidgety fool nor do I lack a spine. I do concur, however, that our friends were most mistaken. If Narcissa thinks that I would *ever* be interested in a man who cannot even get through the first minute of dinner without insulting his date, then she must be delusional. Not to mention the fact that I find the very thought of entertaining you as a romantic interest utterly ridiculous."

Hermione, pragmatic as she was, knew that her last statement wasn't strictly true. She had been willing enough to ogle the man during those first few seconds when she hadn't known his identity, but those were only physical traits. A personality, or the lack thereof, she told herself, could sour even the most appealing of physiques.

Severus winced inwardly; the identity of his date had completely leached from his mind the fact that he had been ordered into good behaviour. The know-it-all was a completely inappropriate as a choice for a date, but if he did not behave as he had been specifically ordered to do, then the binding magic of the forfeit would not release him. Bristling inwardly, he cursed Lucius for this perverse torment. Then, gritting his teeth, he took in a deep breath and allowed his anger to flow to the back of his mind. He would deal with Lucius later; for now he needed to get through an evening with the most irritating witch known to man.

"Be that as it may, we find ourselves here," he said, throwing himself into his chair. The swift and slightly petulant movement reminded Hermione of the way Harry and Ron would, in a fit of frustration, throw themselves into their chairs during their Hogwarts study sessions, ill-tempered and with little style. His eyes glinted harshly at the shocked gasp that escaped her as he summoned a waiter.

She watched him closely as he arranged with great ease for the first course to be served. Normally, Hermione would have balked at a date who arranged her meal without consultation, but it was common knowledge that no one ordered at *Epine Noire*; the chef magically selected each table's dinner according to the guests themselves. It was the top echelon of fine cuisine, and one would have to be mad to argue with the chef of such an establishment.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder what the man was playing at as he did his duty as the male half of the date and arranged for the meal to begin. The sudden shift in his behaviour left her feeling wrong-footed and wary. Wondering the best way to handle the dinner, she simply couldn't fathom what reason he could possibly have for deciding to stay or why he was almost cordially arranging their dinner, as if it were perfectly acceptable for him to dine with her, when it obviously was not. Hermione had fully expected that after she had spoken to him with such disrespect he would turn on heel and march right out, but something had made him stay. If there was one thing Hermione had learned about Severus Snape over the years, it was that he never did anything without a reason, and this immediately put her on alert.

Hermione watched until he had completed the final meal arrangements, and when the two of them were once again alone, she said in a voice that was sharp but not entirely unkind, "Sir, I cannot help but notice that you have decided, for whatever reason, to continue this farce of a date. Now, as it is clear to me that you do not desire a relationship, of any form, between the pair of us, I must ask myself why you are still here. It was my understanding that Severus Snape never does frivolous things, and from what I can tell, this certainly falls into that category."

"Insufferable twit," he sputtered with a roll of his eyes, but Hermione cut him short with a return roll of her own eyes.

"Honestly," Hermione huffed with exasperation. "We have already established that you do not like me; I am an insufferable know-it-all, just as I was many years ago. You needn't continue to harp on it; the fact will remain the same whether we talk about it or not. Additionally, it does nothing to explain why you are still here." A smirk started to grow on her face, and her eyes shone with true amusement as he stared at her, his face void of expression. "Furthermore," she said, crossing her arms in front of her as she continued to push at his limits, "I have no qualms continuing behaving like the know-it-all that I am until you explain yourself, especially since it frustrates you. I do so enjoy causing you frustration. Now, there is obviously something more going on here than you are letting on. Spill."

"Damn, Lucius," he growled under his breath.

Hermione smiled, knowing that she was making progress. "So, Lucius set you up?"

Severus winced slightly. "Fine... Yes, Lucius set me up," he snapped, a malicious sneer stretching across his face.

Hermione ignored the nasty tone and searing look of hate, continuing to tease him in a completely unaffected manner. "Well, that is at least something. Though, it doesn't explain why you are still here."

"Bah, it does not matter why I am here," he bellowed suddenly, and Hermione was instantly thankful for the privacy charms around the tables. "We will eat the food," he continued to bark, "drink the wine and have minimal conversation. Then, when we have completed the meal, we will go our separate ways, never to speak of this night again. That is all that is required, and I suggest that you do so or you shall suffer the consequences." He looked at her viciously, as if daring her to contradict him.

Hermione tried to hold back the burst of laughter that suddenly filled her, but she could not. It had been some time since Severus Snape had been her professor, and from this angle, his caustic nature seemed rather humorous. Plus, it was clear to her that he was extremely set on not explaining his motives in staying, which only further drove her curiosity. As she laughed openly, thoroughly amused by his explosive barking of orders, he looked at her with incredulous alarm.

"The consequences, eh?" she taunted with a raised eyebrow and a saucy smirk. "You do realise that I am not one of your students to torment, right? I've long since left the halls of Hogwarts, *Professor* Snape. What consequences would you have for me? Will you billow and glare me in submission?" She grinned at him impishly.

Hermione knew very well that the man could find perfectly horrid consequences, if he really wanted to, but she also was very much aware of exactly who he was and how he had behaved in the past. The man was all bark and little bite. Besides, no matter how rough of a façade he maintained for the rest of the world, he had risked his life in order to save hers far too many times for her to truly fear him, and she suspected that was exactly why it was so easy for her to get under his skin.

He stared at her incredulously as she continued to press him for information. "Now, for the final time, why are you still here?" Hermione demanded, slamming her hand on to the table, her eyes sparkling with shrewd calculation. "There is a reason, and don't even try to deny it. You said all that is required is for us to complete the meal, and then we can go our separate ways. However, I know for a fact that I am very much free to walk out that door at any moment I choose. Nothing about this is a requirement for me; I am here by my own choice. This is not the same for you, obviously. So, spill the details. Why are you here?"

Did this inscrutable woman never stop? Gritting his teeth roughly, he swallowed the desire to savage her with words. "Merlin, woman. Must you be such a harpy?" he grumbled, not daring to allow himself to voice anything more.

"Yes, I must." Hermione smiled at him again.

"All right, fine," he spat, deciding that it would be better to just get the conversation over with as quickly as possible. Otherwise, he held little chance of getting through this date with the forfeit being fulfilled. "If you must know, yes, Lucius requires me to complete this date in a respectable manner."

"Because..." Hermione goaded. She had no doubt in her mind that he had yet to give her the whole truth.

He looked at her silently for a moment with cold, calculating eyes. Then, as he realised that she was neither relenting nor reacting to his fury, he broke the stare in defeat. Looking down at the table, he let out a long sigh. This really was not how he had wanted this date to go, confessions to self-righteous Gryffindors included. It also occurred to him that Narcissa, in her warning about not disclosing the existence of the forfeit, had failed to consider the mind of the woman they were setting him up with. There was no denying that Ms Granger was quick, if nothing else. "Because," Severus he said in a low tone, "it is a magically bound forfeit, thus allowing him to set me up on one blind date whether I desire it or not."

Hermione snorted, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Wait, you lost a bet with Lucius Malfoy, and he is using the magical forfeit to force you to go on a date?"

He nodded somewhat sullenly.

"With me?" Incredulity flooded her voice.

He nodded again.

Though she was very amused by the situation, she did have to wonder why, of all women in the Wizarding world, Lucius Malfoy would pick her?

"Why me?" she asked sincerely.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Ms Granger," he told her. "I think he knew that, although you technically meet all my usual requirements for what I look for in a date, your ability to grate on my every last nerve far surpasses any others. Now, as we have completed my humiliation, can we move onto some other topic?" He huffed out a breath and then took a large gulp of wine. It was both uncouth and very out of character for him.

Hermione sat stunned for a moment as she considered exactly what he meant by saying that she met his date criteria. She really didn't care about the irritating him part; she'd always irritated him and guessed she always would, but meeting his criteria was certainly intriguing.

"Oh, no. That is not going to happen," she said as a small thrill ran through her. *This is too good to pass up.* "You have to tell me; what was the bet?"

"I am not continuing this conversation," he snarled, his expression instantly turning nasty.

"No, no, no, what was the bet?" she pressed him, paying no mind to that fact that he had once again found a firm hold on his anger. She was far too amused that she had got the better of Severus Snape, even if for only a second, to have any mercy on the poor sod now.

"The bet, Mr Snape," she demanded with a brilliant smile, "or I will walk out of here and make it abundantly clear that you behaved abominably toward me in my report to Narcissa." It was her final card, she knew, but she had to try.

This drew him up short. For a second, he allowed himself to be surprised at her audacity. He had no idea that the Princess of the Golden Trio would try blackmailing him. She had apparently grown up and learned a thing or two about the world. However, he was the King of Slytherin tactics, and there was no way he could ever be out-Slytherined by a Gryffindor, even if she was the most brilliant witch of her age. As he felt his irritation fall down a notch...he always had enjoyed a good back and forth with someone who wasn't an imbecile...he decided that perhaps he could play along for awhile; after all this was a date. With that idea in mind, a smirk began to grow on his face.

"As amusing as that would be," he drawled, an eyebrow rising, "I shall simply inform them of the truth: That, once I recovered from my fit of temper, I graciously begged your apologies and then proceeded to behave as an ideal dinner companion. I do believe I even went so far as to inquire as to your profession, and the conversation that followed could be called nothing but polite."

"The magic will know if you are lying," Hermione said with obvious suspicion.

"Who says that I will be lying?" His voice turned suddenly smooth, and he flashed a rakish grin at her. Severus knew that he'd succeeding in cornering the unruly woman as he watched her eyes go wide with confusion. "Ms Granger," he purred as he quickly reached across the table and swiped up her hand. "Please accept my humblest apologies for my behaviour this evening. I am well known for my temper, true, but it was poorly done of me to take it out on you."

A speechless Hermione gaped at him, her eyes darting from the odd smile on his face, to their joined hands upon the tabletop. Her eyes, wild with astonishment, looked rather owlish as an involuntary smile began to grow on her face. There was something about the combination of his apology, which, though sounding sincere, she knew was meant sarcastically, and the boyish grin on his face. It was so unlike Snape, yet in that moment, it fit so perfectly on him that she felt laughter begin to build in her for a second time that evening. Then, a small giggle escaped, and once the dam had broken, she descended into a full fit of hysterical laughter. Tears pricked at her eyes, and her cheeks flushed with the hilarity of the situation. With a quick squeeze to his hand, she gave him a quick nod of assent.

"All right, then, Mr Potions Master, have it your way," Hermione said as she took several long calming breaths. "Oh, Merlin! I haven't had such a great laugh in ages."

Severus quirked his head to the side and watched as she composed herself. He realised now that he really didn't know what to make of the odd witch. She was unlike any other woman he'd met.

"Though, remember, the magic will know," she said, drawing him from his contemplation of her.

"Indeed, it will," he agreed.

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Severus watched as Hermione refilled her glass of wine and again began to take small sips, and then he asked in a tone that was frightening in its niceness, "Now tell me, Ms Granger, what do you do by profession?"

Hermione took in a startled breath just as she swallowed and had to quickly set down her wine glass as she coughed and sputtered in disbelief. "Y-You're serious?" she asked as she made dabs at her mouth with her napkin.

He let out a small breath of exasperation. "Woman, I said as much, and I never ask frivolous questions. So, if I asked you, it stands to reason that I desire an answer. Have you broken that brain of yours with your foolish nattering?"

For a brief moment, Hermione considered exactly how she wanted to answer this question. She could answer generally, with little to no detail, as she would her usual dates, and it would serve the man right after how he had behaved. However, there was something inside her that stopped. She knew that behaving in such a manner wouldn't get her where she wanted to go, not that she really had any idea of where that was. When she considered the fact that Severus Snape was a man who had intrigued her for years and that she would really like to know what made him tick despite his generally appalling behaviour, she knew that generalities were not the best course.

"Okay, okay," she relented. "If you really want to know... By profession I do two things. I am the Head Coordinator of Operations at Nym's House Orphanage. I won't be so daft as explain the operation, because I know you are aware of exactly what Nym's House does, except to say that it is where I met and became friends with Narcissa, who is under the impression that I work too much and in need of a night of fun." The look on her face told him that she was certainly questioning Narcissa's idea of fun.

"My duties there range from tending to the children, to taking care of personnel issues, to arranging the daily operation of the orphanage itself. It is my passion and my heart, and I would gladly devote the rest of my life to those children. However, charity work does not pay the bills, and in order to do that, my second profession takes the form of Lead Arithmancy Consultant for Malfoy Industries. I manage all of the Master-level financial and magical Arithmancy equations for them. The subjects run the gamut from Muggle stock-market fluctuations, to experimental potions ingredient reactions, and even magical evaluations on the experimental charms used in the growth of magical and Muggle plants. I work with them on a per diem basis. But if it involves Arithmancy, then I am the one organizing it for them."

Severus was impressed. He knew that she was involved with the orphanage; he'd heard Narcissa speak of her on several occasions, but to be skilled enough to run Arithmancy calculations for Malfoy Industries... Well, he knew that Lucius must trust Ms Granger a great deal, and though he was using her to poke fun at Severus' easily irritated manner, he probably respected her a lot as well. "And do you enjoy your work?" he continued. His eyes looked shockingly interested as he asked the blatantly bland question.

Hermione looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Never took you as one for small talk, Mr Snape. As inane as the question is... I suppose I enjoy it as much as anyone can enjoy Arithmancy. It pays well, and I am good at it."

"Indeed. Arithmancy is a tool, a map to other magics. Though I suppose there is some excitement and joy to be found in the solving of a particularly challenging equation, in the end all you have is a piece of paper."

"Exactly, so I use Arithmancy to pay the bills and pour my energy into bettering the lives of those who need it the most."

"It is an admirable sentiment. It is also a reflection of your capability that you've been entrusted with such important calculations by one as galleon conscious as Lucius Malfoy. It says a lot to those who know him," he said in a markedly sincere tone that startled both of them.

"Thank you," she replied with quiet surprise, a light blush tingeing her cheeks. Even after all these years, she was surprised to find the need for his approval to be as poignant and as strong as it had been when she was fifteen. What she finally looked up at him, pushing her slight embarrassment away, she asked, "What about you? You teach, I know that. Why? What makes Mr Snape tick now that he is no longer saving the arse of a naive oaf and his friends?"

"Naive oaf, eh?" Severus queried.

"Oh, don't you even think you can turn the conversation back to me or my friends," she quipped playfully, her eyes catching his, which sent a spark of attraction through her that left her stomach flipping lightly. "I know those tactics, and they won't work. Tit for tat, sir. This is a date, and as such, you are required to share."

Severus stared into her eyes for a moment, and then as she shook her head to add emphasis to her words, he took in her flushed cheeks and listened to how she was happily nagging him, as if it were completely normal and acceptable. He didn't want to admit it, but suddenly, in that instant, she didn't seem so irritating to him anymore. Perhaps it wasn't so odious to give her a sincere answer because, really, if there was anyone in this world who could appreciate where he had come from and what he had gone through, it was Hermione Granger. She was smart and, at the very least, knew his history better than any other date he had encountered.

Hermione was altogether surprised and unnerved at the turn the evening seemed to be taking. After she had asked her question, he had looked into her eyes with an intensity that she could feel in her bones, and then he actually gave her a real answer. It wasn't anything earth-shattering, simply that he enjoyed brewing and reading in his free time, which was very little during the school year, and that, in the summers since the end of the war, he had tried to do as little as possible as he'd had precious little time to relax in the past twenty years. But it was the truth. It wasn't posturing or vague, it was an honest-to-goodness straight answer. It was an answer that she could greatly appreciate, understand and even admire. And it left her altogether speechless.

His breath felt weak and hollow in his chest as he completed his reply to her. Severus was stunned and trying very much to hide it. He had not expected it to be so easy to share that answer, and true, it wasn't a deep revelation, but still, it had been completely sincere, which was far more than most of his dates got.

When he had initially realised who his date was, he had been completely appalled. She was the female member of the Golden Trio; there was no way he could ever be interested in her. But, once they had both got over their initial surprise, and then she had proved that she could keep up with him conversationally, his irritation had faded. And when that had happened, all that there was left for him to do was to acknowledge and admire how expressive her eyes were. He couldn't help but be pleased that her hair, though curly, was still very successfully playing the tantalizing game of hide-and-seek with the pale skin of her neck. No, he had not been interested in the woman

romantically, but now, perhaps he could allow himself the leeway that maybe he was wrong in his initial reaction. After all, it wasn't Hermione's fault that Lucius had chosen her to torment him. If there was anyone who deserved his censure, it was not Hermione, but Lucius. And Lucius would pay; he would make sure of that.

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As they stood in the foyer of the restaurant readying themselves to leave, Hermione once again broached the topic that had been left behind much earlier in the evening. "So, last chance to tell me what the bet was," she teased with ease, the tension of earlier long since forgotten. "I could always ask Narcissa, you know."

"And I do believe that you will find Narcissa is completely in the dark as to the nature of the bet as well. Suffice it to say, Ms Granger," he said as amusement danced in his eyes, "that you will never find out what the bet was. However, I must say that it was not so odious that I lost, in the end. Tonight has been more entertaining than I thought possible."

"I had a lovely time as well, sir. Though, I do wish you would call me Hermione," she told him, gathering up her cloak.

"Hermione, then," he purred as he helped her into the fur-lined cloak. When it was settled into place and fastened, he ran his hand softly down her covered arms.

Hermione shivered under his touch, and when she turned to face him, she saw the familiar knowing smirk that rested on his lips. Choosing to ignore it, she asked, "Do you think we can leave from here? I'd rather not have to try and make it to the Apparition point in this weather."

He turned to look out the window. The snow was still coming down in large flakes. The drift on the ground lay at least two feet thick.

"I do believe that would be acceptable, unless, of course, the Gryffindor know-it-all has not the ability to Apparate silently."

Hermione rolled her eyes and let out a delicate snort. "Thanks for that, I can see your confidence in my abilities shining through." Then, with a shake of her head, she smiled once again and extended her hand toward him. "Well...?"

Severus' heart suddenly ached as he looked at the striking woman extending her hand to him with such a trusting and open expression. As he took up the proffered hand with his fingertip and gently turned it so that he could place a soft, lingering kiss on the back, he told himself he was not behaving in such a manner because she was rather beautiful and had been an enchanting dinner companion who had completely disarmed him. No, he internally scoffed, this was simply his last chance to mess with the witch's head, and that was all. He wasn't attracted to her at all, and it would not do to allow their date to end without keeping her on her toes the entire time.

As his eyes purposefully met hers, he smiled wickedly. Hermione was blushing a beautiful rose. Idly, he noted that it stretched from her cheeks all the way down to the front of her dress, where it disappeared from view. "Now, I will bid you good evening, Hermione," he purred, low and tantalizing, before releasing her hand and spinning away in silent Apparation.

"Show off," Hermione said breathlessly into the empty space where he had been standing only moments before, her stomach still fluttering with excitement and heart still pounding. Then, pulling her cloak about her, she too spun silently into the night.

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