

Collaborators

by Rose of the West

Severus Snape is asked to take on a collaborator during the summer of 1985. He grudgingly agrees, and a friendship begins. Written for the 2013 Snape Showcase on LJ.

One Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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He hated smart Gryffindors.

If the members of Godric's House were going to be brawny and jump headlong into Merlin knew what, they couldn't have brains, too. They had to be barely able to tie their shoes. If they had any sense at all, it simply wouldn't be fair.

Not that life was fair. Nothing he'd experienced so far in twenty-five years allowed him to think that life was the slightest bit fair. It didn't matter if he wanted to shepherd a Gryffindor through the next four years of his education because the boy was brilliant, he'd have to do it. Never mind all the Owls and Howlers he would get from the parents of Slytherins, who rightly expected him to attend to *their* futures. If Dumbledore wanted William Weasley to get an inordinate amount of the Potions Master's time, then William Weasley would get his time.

Such were the thoughts of Severus Snape as he cleared the remains of the just-finished school year from his desk. After summarizing the various class results on a long scroll, he sent the rest of the records to a filing cabinet and stood up. He brushed off his robe. It was actually a fairly grubby robe, but it was good enough for the next task.

After whispering "candy necklace" to the statue, he traveled up the moving stairs and knocked on the door.

"Come in, Severus!"

"Headmaster, I have my records for this year."

"Very good."

"About William Weasley, sir..."

"Ah, yes, I've decided you were absolutely correct. His own House Head is the best person to shepherd him through the intricacies of taking the extra classes he needs to take."

There wasn't time to shake his head or even to feel relief, because Dumbledore was already on his next topic. "I have other plans for you this summer."

"Headmaster, I was planning to do some potions research."

"Exactly. I've taken the liberty of finding you a laboratory partner."

"Excuse me?"

"I made some inquiries about your plans for this summer, and found someone to work with you on your proposed improvements to the Wolfsbane potion. Andromeda's work as a Healer will be invaluable to you, and she will benefit from having a project over the summer. Ted is travelling on business and their daughter is staying with Muggle relatives over the summer."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "So I'm supposed to babysit an aging housewife with an empty nest? I had plans to actually accomplish something."

There was a movement to his right, and a soft voice that went straight to where it mattered. "Don't worry, Severus, I'll try not to get too much in your way."

He turned and saw her there, not much changed since he had last seen her years before in the Slytherin Common Room. Her hair was pulled back, but there were tendrils that had come free and gave evidence of the wild mane that he'd only seen once or twice during late-night safety drills. Her face was rounder than Narcissa's and more cheerful than Bellatrix's. It was her voice that did him in though. Carefully bred and relentlessly trained, Andromeda had the voice of culture and good breeding that was ruined in one sister by mania and in the other by petulance.

"Andromeda," he said, trying to recover from the impossible, "it's good to see you again."

"Aside from the fact that I'm an aging housewife who needs a babysitter?" She had him at a loss and, from the mischievous smile on her face, she knew it. "Don't worry; I shan't get in your way, and I do know a thing or two about Lycanthropy. I've been administering the current form of the potion to poor souls for several years now, and I've seen first hand what it does help and what it doesn't help."

"Are you familiar with the instructions for brewing this potion?"

"Yes. I've been making it for over a year now. I've taken notes on the different ways that aconite is prepared and how it affects the recipients."

Suddenly, Severus was more than a little interested. "That was something I wanted to investigate. Do you mean you have notes on the subject already?"

"Yes."

It wouldn't do to be too excited or cheerful in front of Dumbledore. The old man presumed too much on the few kindnesses he'd shown Snape anyway. "I suppose this arrangement will be agreeable, Headmaster." Turning to Andromeda, he said, "I'll see you in St. Mungo's laboratories on Monday at eight, sharp."

She smiled, and he noticed a dimple he'd never seen before. "I look forward to it, Severus."

She was there before him. She wore her hair back again, this time without any loose bits, in a braid that went down her back. She wore the standard robes of a Healer. If she hadn't been smiling somewhat mischievously, she would look very professional.

"You look very nice," she said. "Your hair looks different."

His hand went up to his head self-consciously. He would never admit why he took extra care with it. "I thought that, since I'm here in the hospital, I should make the effort. It's a waste of time, given that as soon as I start brewing, it will look the same as it always does."

"I've got everything laid out for the first batch," she said, waving at the laboratory benches.

He looked it over. "I see you have the standard recipe set up. You have the naturally dried aconite. How was it ground?"

"I used a ceramic mortar and pestle. Of all the choices, the sun-dried aconite ground this way seems to provide a little less upheaval when my patients transform."

"You have patients who are werewolves?"

"A few of them, yes."

"I read the notes you sent me, and I concur. I thought we could make one batch as usual and one with a slight modification I designed."

"There is a small group within the hospital who have agreed to be your test subjects, Professor."

"Are any of them your patients?"

She shook her head. "No, mine are a little too fragile to use as test subjects."

They worked quietly. He spent much of his time watching her technique and although she took short cuts, they were ones he would occasionally take himself. He had little to complain about.

The full moon came later that first week. On that evening, they carried two cauldrons of Wolfsbane potion out into the wards. The test subjects were in one section of separate cells, and Andromeda helped serve the potion from Severus's cauldron to each wizard or witch.

When they were done in that section, Snape looked at Andromeda and asked, "Where is your precious potion going?"

She looked at him with a sad smile and then nodded her head toward a different ward. "Follow me."

He followed her into a back ward in the pediatric wing. "Children?"

"There are some lycans who place themselves where the young are easy to find," she said in a low voice. "These are the ones who survived their first transformations."

He looked at the sad, world-weary faces. "They're so young to suffer so much."

"Yes."

There were tears in her eyes, so he said no more. Together, they gave the children their doses of the potion. He watched as she gently played a little with them and then closed the cells in which they would stay during the full moon.

As they walked out of the ward, a little hand snatched at her skirt. "Healer Dromeda?"

She turned around and smiled, "Yes, Sam?"

"Will it hurt this time?"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm afraid it will. Hopefully, it won't hurt as bad as last time. I used the best recipe I know will work and the grown-ups are trying a recipe that we think will be better. If it works this time for them, you get to have it next time."

"Will you ever find the potion that cures me completely?"

"I hope so. I mean to keep trying until I do. You lie down on your bed and try to rest, and I'll come by to see you first thing in the morning."

"All right then. You'll really be here?"

She chuckled, "I'll bring you your breakfast and we'll go to your regular ward together."

There was a final wave goodbye to all of them, and she turned and left the ward, nodding to the mediwitch in charge. They walked silently to the laboratory and set the room to rights. "If you'll place your caldron near the sink, I'll wash them both."

"Andromeda, I had no idea. I've seen a full-grown werewolf before, but I didn't realize what it was like for the children."

She filled the cauldrons with hot soapy water and wouldn't turn to look at him. "They suffer so, and yet they trust me so much. That's why I can't let you give them your test potions. They have to have the best potion that we know works."

He remembered an engagement he had later that evening. "If you don't mind, I have an invitation to a dinner party at..." Suddenly, he realized where he was going, and it was awkward.

"You're going to that major event at Malfoy Manor?"

It sounded silly when she said it. He felt himself turning red. "Yes, I was invited because I'm the Slytherin Head."

"Don't let me keep you, then. If you should get a chance, could you give my sister my greetings?"

"Don't you see her yourself?"

"Not since I ran away and married Ted."

"Do you miss her?"

"Not usually, but after a day like today in the ward, and with no one to go home to ..." She shrugged, although she never turned away from washing the cauldrons.

The event at Malfoy Manor was a glittering success. Severus sat near his hostess, between a matron twice his age and a lovely young witch just a few years younger than he was. "I asked to be near you," she said. "I was sent to Beauxbatons, but I have heard such wonderful things about Slytherin House. I want to know everything I've missed."

He answered her questions, quite charmed by the way her brown eyes looked whenever he told her anything. He found himself a bit bereft when the ladies left the dining room.

"I hope you'll be there when the dancing starts," she whispered.

It was difficult to pay attention to the conversation of the men. It was all about how the pureblood families were expected to fit into Wizarding society as a whole and why they should be expected to allow their children to bring home lesser creatures as potential mates.

Severus had already worked out several of these questions for himself, and he feared that he would be considered a "lesser creature" in some of these homes, so he kept silent and simply listened. They encouraged Lucius to get himself placed on the Hogwarts Board of Governors, as they always did. Then the appearance of a House-elf in a doorway indicated that it was time to go to the ball room.

The pretty girl was waiting for him when the dancing started. "You promised!" she said with a smile.

He asked her about Beauxbatons. "Oh, it was quite the loveliest place on earth!" she averred. She then proceeded to tell him about the grounds and the professors.

He let her talk on and let himself imagine that he was dancing with a different witch. They had similar dark hair and eyes, although Andromeda's voice was much smoother and more cultured. When the song was over, he bowed slightly and mentioned that he needed to dance with the hostess.

Dancing with Narcissa wasn't as pleasant as with... what was her name, anyway? "Your sister sends her greetings, Madam Malfoy."

Narcissa's eyebrows went up in question. "You've been to Azkaban, recently?"

Severus shook his head. "No, I had the opportunity to see your other sister today."

Narcissa shrugged. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken, Professor Snape. I only have one sister."

He could take a hint. "I see. My mistake."

"So what did Cissy say?"

It was after lunch, and Severus had been hoping that she wouldn't ask. Looking at her now, it appeared that she'd been trying not to get her hopes up, but that she couldn't stand to wait any longer.

"I'm sorry."

"She said something awful about me."

"No, in all honesty, she didn't."

"Then what did she say?"

"She said that, other than the one in Azkaban, she doesn't have any sisters."

"Oh." It was said in a quiet squeak.

"She's an idiot."

"No, actually, she's brilliant. If she admitted to having a Mudblood-loving sister, she'd be an outcast. Guilt by association, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"I think the more important question is, how you liked Marjorie Hampton? There was a lovely picture of the two of you together in the paper."

He looked at her in question. "Who is Marjorie Hampton?"

"The young lady you danced several times with last night, according to the paper."

"I didn't pay much attention to her."

"She was paying a great deal of attention to you, if the pictures are accurate."

"I didn't really notice." He looked at her intently, wondering how he could have compared the other girl to Andromeda in his mind. There was no contest between a somewhat shallow girl who cared about parties and social status and this woman who cried over the children in her care.

Andromeda's head tilted as she looked at Severus curiously, and then she shrugged and changed the subject. "How shall we proceed on our research, then?"

The results from the night before showed signs of promise. The potion on the test subjects was an improvement for some but not all of them. The information gained was helpful in designing the next month's tests and in the intervening weeks, they worked on better ways to prepare and purify the ingredients.

The following month, Andromeda consented to use Severus's improvements on the potion with the children. The further adjustments he tried on the adults showed no great improvement, but the children were a different story.

"Healer Dromeda!" said little Sam, "It worked so much better! I went to sleep, and I never woke up until this morning. The mediwitch says I changed, but I don't remember at all!"

Andromeda asked the other children, and they all nodded their heads. One was awake during his transformation, but it didn't pain him as it always had before. She looked up at Severus with happy tears in her eyes. "You don't know how this makes me feel...it's a miracle, Severus."

He didn't know, but he was learning about the joy of making happiness for others. He certainly knew that part of this elation in his heart was due to the way she looked at him. She smiled as if he had hung the moon for her.

He carried that look home with him at night and dissected it. Was that smile for him or would she smile the same way for any Potions expert? He tried to picture her looking at Horace Slughorn in that same way, but it made no sense. Would she have the same ease of manner with anyone else? He didn't want to think so.

The next morning, she invited him to dinner. "I thought I'd fix a small celebration for us," she said with a smile. "We can toast our success and hope for further good work."

His heart beat quickly. "That... would be agreeable," he said. As they worked that day, he pondered how best to prepare for such an event and what to bring with him.

He brought a bottle of elf made wine. "I believe it's tolerable," he said.

She spluttered. "This is an excellent wine for my poor stew. Tolerable, indeed." She turned and led him to the dining room. "There's a corkscrew on the side table. Would you pour while I bring dinner in?"

"Of...of course." He craned his neck to watch her walk into the kitchen.

He had the wine poured when she came in. There was therefore nothing to look at except her. She was wearing a dress that was casual but made her look pretty. Her hair was down. It looked very soft. Her face, which he'd seen in a variety of expressions over the past month and a half, was perfect.

She sat down and served his dinner and then her own. "It's a good stew. I learned it from Ted's mum. She's a brilliant cook, brilliant at everything, actually."

"It is good. I can't imagine when you had time to prepare it."

"Thank you." She was blushing as she cut him a slice of bread.

"So," she said, clearly trying to change the subject, "what about you and Marjorie?"

"I don't know," he answered. "She seems to like me."

"Isn't that the point?"

"I have no idea. I'm bad at love."

"Why would you say that?"

He opened and shut his mouth, unwilling to answer.

"Never mind. It was an impertinent question. I suppose the right witch simply hasn't come along."

"You're free to believe that, if you wish."

"She just seems like the right sort of girl for a Hogwarts Head of House. She's got the right bloodlines, but not so pure that a schoolteacher wouldn't be good enough for her. That is..." She frowned then.

Severus felt his heart sinking. "She doesn't have the expectations that a Black would, you mean."

Her head snapped up. "Oh, Severus, no. I don't include myself in those conversations. I'm a blood-traitor, after all, and when it comes to you, those things don't matter to me. That is..." She took a big gulp of the wine. "This is far better than tolerable."

"Lucius says it's better than swill, but he could name six better vintages."

"Lucius is an idiotic, pompous ass. That is ..." She lifted her glass to her lips again.

When she put it down, the glass was empty and her face was very red. "I don't know what's got into me tonight."

"You miss your family."

"That I do. I had a letter from Nymphadora today. She says all the right things, but I can read between the lines. She's having a far better time with Ted's family than she would with me. And I haven't had a letter from Ted in a long time. I can read between those lines, too. He's having a far better time than he would if I were there." She blinked for several minutes at a window, and then concentrated on her dinner.

Severus refilled her glass. Seeing that his own was almost empty, he refilled it, too. "Do you think I should try to develop a relationship with Marjorie?"

She put her spoon down and picked up her wine glass with both hands. "I think you should do what's likely to give you the greatest contentment. Marjorie's family will have taught her how to manage the sort of household a man of your standing would have. She would arrange and hold the dinner parties that you should have, and she would

give you children to carry on your name and look after you when you when you become old. If that's the sort of life you aspire to, you might do much worse. She seems quite eager to please you, after all."

"Never mind. We're here to toast our success." He lifted his glass. "To a fine collaboration, and may more work result from it."

"Hear, hear."

They continued dinner and spoke of Hogwarts. "Tell me about Nymphadora," she said. "I send her, and I get the reports, and I hear what she has to say, but I have no sense of what or how she's doing."

How could he answer? He didn't pay much attention to the students and their doings. The child in question was quite noticeable, though. "She's quite popular, I believe. The other professors call her 'easy going,' and they say she's quite likeable."

"That'll be her father shining out through her. He's easy going, and extremely likeable, too." She drank more of her wine. "He's a little too likeable, actually."

"Where is he?"

"Burma? Bermuda? Bombay? Someplace with a B at the beginning," she said.

"You miss him."

"Yes."

She stood up and carried out some of the dishes. Severus picked up the soup tureen and followed her.

"Oh, Severus, you didn't have to..." She turned around and took the tureen from him. She set it on the counter and stared up at him.

They were standing far closer than they ever had before, and he was surprised by how little she was. She was just the size he remembered her being when she was at Hogwarts, but he'd been just a child at the time. Now he was an adult, and his instincts were filled with soft emotions toward her; protectiveness and tenderness were high on the list.

She was looking up at him in a way that didn't seem negative. Could she tell that his pulse was jumping? Was she aware of him the way that he was aware of her, that he'd grown to be aware of her over the last weeks?

He tried to calm himself by slowing his breathing. He closed his eyes, and then it happened. Her lips were pressed to his, or perhaps his to hers. Either way, their arms slid around each other and their bodies nestled together as if formed for each other. This was what he'd imagined when he watched her working in the laboratory and smoothing down the hair of children in the hospital. This was the witch he wanted managing his dinner parties and...

The pulled apart, looked at each other, and both said, "We can't."

"Well, we could, I suppose," said Andromeda. "I know some people who definitely would, but I don't think either of us would feel quite right about it."

"So you'll be true to your philandering husband."

"And you'll give Marjorie a real chance."

He helped her with the dishes, a process that was so similar to washing up in the laboratory that they already knew each other's moves. When the meal was cleared away, there was really nothing to do but leave. It was a bit awkward saying good-bye.

"Are you sure you're all right to Apparate?" she asked. We emptied that bottle, after all."

"I'll be fine," he reassured her.

They kissed each other on the cheek, and he left.

They were surprisingly easy with each other in the laboratory the next day, although Andromeda would never be quite as comfortable as she once had been. She stopped asking Severus about Marjorie, and she behaved a little more professionally.

Severus adjusted his behavior accordingly. Over the next few days, their working relationship settled into something that was collegial, but not quite as cordial as what had been. Perhaps it was simply finding its proper depth.

He tried to go places with Marjorie, guessing that her behavior at events Narcissa engineered was shallow and stiff due to the events rather than to her nature. Over several months, he tried different situations to see if she ever became natural and easy, but she never did.

The school year started, and Severus bid Andromeda farewell, although they still corresponded about Wolfsbane and were able to continue their research in a way. When the second year Hufflepuffs had Potions, he watched a certain child closely, looking for something resembling the presence and grace of her mother. She was a winning child, but clearly resembled her father more than her mother.

He saw less and less of Marjorie. Eventually she married a Rosier. Narcissa sighed over it, but he was perfectly happy to go to that wedding and even danced with the bride.

He visited Andromeda in her office at St. Mungo's.

"You let her slip by," she said, with the same mischievous smile she had used in Dumbledore's office.

"She didn't really fit," he said, with a shrug.

"You do need someone who will help you find contentment. Trying to work with someone who's not quite right wouldn't be to the advantage of either of you."

"Actually, I think I've found contentment." He had his Potions work, the funds to supply himself with a few of the finer things in life, and such friendships as he wanted.

"As a bachelor school teacher?"

"Until the right witch comes along... or becomes available," he answered.

She sucked in her breath and stared into his eyes. He had never used Legilimency on her before, but he only needed a bit of the art to know that she was aware of exactly what he meant.

He chuckled to throw off the tension. "Perhaps I'll finally find the right one, and she won't want me."

Her cheeks were a bit pink as she answered. "If she doesn't want you, how could she be the right one?"

"I think you're my biggest fan, Andromeda."

"I suppose I need a hobby, or perhaps just someone to keep tabs on Nymphadora. Are you sure she's behaving as well as you claimed when I asked you at Christmas?"

"She gets into mischief, but no worse than some other students."

"All right, then, but I expect you to let me know."

He rolled his eyes. "Salazar's mittens! She's a student at school and needs to be allowed to do what the other students do. You do need a hobby!"

"Ted's out of the country again. Someplace with an L this time. Lithuania? Latvia? Maybe Lichtenstein."

That was the opening he was hoping for. "There is something I could use some help with."

"Oh?"

"I ought to have a dinner party for some of my students and their parents, and I could use a hostess."

She turned white. "Oh, I don't know. Those people will talk."

"I don't think they would believe anything was happening between us."

"That's not it. I'm not accepted, Severus. It would be entirely a faux pas for you to have me there. You would be ruined."

"I can't do it myself. I haven't the slightest idea how these things work."

He watched her bite her lip and frown. Finally, she nodded, as if to convince herself of something. "OK, here is how it will work. I'll set everything up, down to the robes you will wear. I will coach you on when to do which things and upon which topics you will discuss. But I can't be present. If my name gets somehow attached to this, it will destroy you. House Head or not, no one in the Slytherin world will accept you."

He didn't need to think about it very long. It would mean that they would be together, perhaps for more time than if she'd agreed to be the hostess. "I accept."

They met at Severus's house. Andromeda walked through it, nodding to herself with a smile when he showed her the lounge that was converted to his library, and shrugging at the rest. Finally she smiled up at him. "It suits you."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Oh, yes. It's exactly the sort of home I would picture for you, surrounded by your books and...what do you call it...you other small comforts."

"There's a 'but' at the back of this."

"You don't really have a space to hold a dinner party for twelve people, do you? Even if we could figure that out, this is not the sort of neighborhood pureblood wizards and witches would come to."

His heart sank. "You don't like it then, then?"

She put her hands on her hips. "Severus, we've been through this. I'm not a pureblood any more. I'm a blood traitor. Blood traitor whore, if you're talking to my older sister, and non-existent if you're speaking with the younger one. I mean for people who care about that sort of thing."

She folded her arms and thought for a moment. "Well, I'm fairly certain there's a place to be had. We'll just have to find it. We need to go shopping, anyway."

They started at Monsieur Bernard's shop. Andromeda explained what was wanted, and then sat in a small waiting room while Severus went to be fussed over in a changing room. After he came out, she tilted her head one way and then the other. She got up and walked around him, a crease forming between her eyes.

Finally, she shrugged and sat down again. "You've made him look like a landed gentleman of two centuries ago. It's perfect, actually, but it's all wrong for him."

"But Madame has specifically mentioned that the clothes are for a dinner party ..."

"Yes, Madame has, and she was wrong to do so. Actually, Severus, you may wish a set of robes like this for attending other people's dinner parties, but it isn't really you, is it?"

He was grateful that she understood. "Not exactly."

She smiled and said, "You see, Monsieur Bernard, Severus is a Professor at Hogwarts. He's an academic. We need something suitable both for a dinner party and for someone in Severus's line of work. Have you anything like that? I'd really rather not go to Madam Malkin."

"Ah, Madame is correct. Never fear, Monsieur Bernard has exactly what is needed."

Moments later, Severus was standing in garments that he liked. He liked the feel of them, and he liked the way they looked on him. He stood looking at himself in the three-sided mirror and realized that he even felt taller wearing them. He looked sheepishly at Andromeda, but she was smiling.

"Yes, that's more like it. You look like yourself. They're very distinguished, and yet you're comfortable in them. This is what we need, Monsieur Bernard."

After they left the tailor's shop. Andromeda walked the length of High Street, staring hard at every building.

"What are you doing?" Severus asked.

She stared at one building, counting windows and doing some mental calculation. Then she shook her head and walked down to the next. "Someone here has a back dining room they don't use often. We're going to borrow it for an evening."

It made perfect sense. The proximity to the school and the neighborhood were very desirable. She had some sort of way of figuring it out, so he'd let her. He could go back to something he hadn't wanted to ask in front of the tailor. "What was that fabric?" he asked. "I'm used to wool. I don't like it much."

"Oh, that was also wool. One hundred percent."

"But it was so soft."

"Wool is soft, if you treat it properly. It also has just the right sort of drape. You might consider getting your teaching robes there."

"His prices were a bit high."

"How often are you replacing your robes? If you purchase something of a higher quality, you won't need to replace them so often."

She was right about that. She was also standing in the middle of the road, pointing at a building on a side street. "There it is."

They walked into Madam Puddifoot's establishment. "We'd like to hire your back dining room," said Andromeda.

"We don't have a back dining room," answered Madam Puddifoot.

"Of course you do, and Professor Snape here is going to hold a dinner party in it." Andromeda might not consider herself pureblood any more, but Madam Puddifoot was flustered by the calm assurance.

"I'm not cooking for a lot of professors and such."

"Of course not. We'll be bringing in House-elves."

"We will?" asked Severus.

"Yes, three or four of them, from Hogwarts."

"I can't commandeer the school's elves!"

"Have you ever tried?" There was that dimple.

"Very well," he sighed.

Once Madam Puddifoot's defenses were breached, it was easy to arrange the date and terms with her. Within moments, they were on the way to the kitchens of Hogwarts.

"I don't think this is going to work," he said.

"Sure it will," she answered, as she tickled the pear on the portrait-door.

"Look! Mistress Andromeda Black has come to see us!"

Within seconds, Andromeda was surrounded by half a dozen elves. When they understood what she was asking for, they were eager to participate. "See? You'll have plenty of help," she said. "All you need to do is give them a small bottle, and I mean the smallest possible bottle, of Butterbeer each."

They ended with tea in his library at home. Andromeda sat on his couch and poured as though she were the Queen. He smiled to himself about how natural she looked.

"So you could be comfortable in a place like this?" He didn't bother asking himself why he cared. He knew.

"I'd need to tidy things up a bit. What I'm sure is a very functional clutter would hurt me to see on a daily basis, but I'm sure we'd come to some sort of compromise. That is..." She stared at her cup.

"Why don't you leave him? He's not any sort of proper husband to you."

"What would I be if I did that? A Mudblood-loving blood traitor whore who's also adulterous? No Slytherin will acknowledge me. If I left him, no Gryffindor or Hufflepuff would, either. I'm not smart enough to be accepted by the Ravenclaws. I'd be an absolute outcast."

"Then don't leave him. Just come be with me from time to time."

"I already do that."

"You know what I mean."

"I can't."

He couldn't stop himself. He kissed her as he'd only imagined doing since that night in her cottage. It was everything he remembered. "Yes, you can."

"What would I be?"

"Loved ... by someone who appreciates you."

It was more of a declaration than he would have wished to make, but he wouldn't take it back. They looked at each other for a long moment.

When she spoke again, she was very quiet and her voice sounded a bit choked. "You deserve better than an adulterous Mudblood-loving blood traitor whore, Severus. I'll be happy to help you with your social calendar until you find a proper wife, but for the rest of it, I can't."

She got up and Summoned her cloak. "I'll see you next week to discuss how things are going," she said.

His heart was sinking. "Is that how it is, then?"

"I'm afraid so. You're a man whose position in the world is good and improving. I mustn't do anything to jeopardize that."

And so it began. After an initial smashing success, Andromeda became his behind-the-scenes helper, managing the social engagements of his life. He forwarded his invitations to her, and she made suggestions about which were ones he ought to accept and which he ought not. Whenever he entertained, she helped him make the arrangements and discussed with him what should happen during the events. Their ease together made him think that there could only be one mistress of his world. Since she would not be leaving her husband, he would do without a wife.

When he had the time, he tracked Ted Tonks and found ways to derail the other wizard's little romances. An unfortunate rainstorm here, a small accident there. He never did anything particularly dangerous or unlawful, just enough to ruin Tonks's plans for an evening. It was amazing how quickly Tonks could wrap up his business and return home on such occasions.

Snape laughed at this streak of valor and honor. He never expected to find such Gryffindorish attitudes within himself. Yet there was something satisfying about knowing that he was helping Andromeda some small bit. He came home after such trips and lifted a glass. Weeks or months later, he and Andromeda would try some new version of the Wolfsbane potion on the test subjects, and he toasted that. Perhaps sometime in the future she would be free to be the mistress of his household in name as well as deed, and he drank to that as well.

A/N: Thank you to Blue Artemis for beta reading.