

Masques

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Sage de Malfoy stared at herself in the massive mirror. The view seemed impossible, and yet it was one that had become increasingly familiar over the past three months. White-blond hair streamed down her back, held away from her face by a complicated interweaving of braids arranged by her personal house elf. Her eyes were a startling black, the contribution of a Mediterranean ancestor. The rest of her face, thankfully, was what she had been born with. Her robes could only be described as sumptuous: shimmering, peacock blue silk with deep insets and wrist-to-elbow bell sleeves of antique Valenciennes lace. She had always considered herself a very practical woman; who knew she had such a terrible weakness for lace? For that matter, as a practical woman, what in the name of the seven troll lords was she even doing here?

It was what happened, she told herself ruefully, her fingers gliding over the reflected face, when a Gryffindor faced not one, but *two* Slytherins. Her temper had gotten the better of her...as they'd probably relied on...and the challenge too great to refuse. Unfortunately, she could only see how to best one or the other of them. Beating both seemed impossible. Either she won the bet for Lucius by going out into that room and justifying all of the time, money, and effort they had both put into the last three months, or she made a monkey out of him and won the bet for Severus. What she *wanted* to do was go out there and prove both of them...and the culture that produced them...to be great, bloody fools.

It seemed that the best she could do would be to go out there, be the best damn Pureblood witch she could be for the next week...and then tell Severus *and* Lucius to go and shove their broomsticks up their arses. She would go back to being Hermione Granger and have nothing more to do with either of them.

Three Months Earlier

It began with sheer, all-encompassing fury. Malfoy had come to her office...her *office*, mark you...and handed her a sheaf of papers, using them to circumvent a particular clause found therein. She took them up, not thinking they would prove to be much of anything, and then read the elaborate script at their head:

A certified duplicate of

A Gentleman's Wager

between Lucius Malfoy & Severus Snape

Concerning Miss Hermione Granger.

Stripped of verbiage, Hermione discovered, the bet was that Malfoy had three months to become his Professor Higgins to her Eliza Doolittle (preferably without the singing)

and turn her into a flawless imitation of a pure-blooded witch. He had to convince her into the position without *telling* her of the bet (this explained the weaselling around the condition using the parchment record), and provide a suitable event at which to present her to wizard 'nobility.' Her plausibility would determine the winner of the bet.

Severus had bet that she'd fail. Probably miserably. Bastard. No, *more* than a bastard. He was a...

"Miss Granger!" Malfoy's sharply snapped vocative sliced through her irritation enough to bring her attention back to him.

"What?" she snapped back.

"I'm well enough with my shields," he replied easily, "but your carpet is smouldering in several places, and that curious contraption you have on the ceiling is beginning to rain ash."

Hermione blushed horribly and set about putting out the fire that she'd started on a blade of her ceiling fan. How mortifying it was to lose her temper in front of one of the most urbane wizards in England. *Pureblood witches don't lose their tempers, I'm sure*, she thought nastily. *Unless they're Bellatrix Lestrange*. The name sent a shudder through her, even after these past several years, and subconsciously, she touched a finger to her neck, where the scar had long since faded. "So why should I *want* to involve myself in your... puerile shenanigans, Mister Malfoy? You know as well as Severus does I haven't the least desire to push myself into a society where I am blatantly unwelcome and in whose members I have no interest. I have *work* to do, Mister Malfoy."

"Work which would be advanced through my tutelage, Miss Granger."

Hermione snorted. Come to think of it, this was probably where Severus had thought Malfoy Senior would hit a snag. He knew damn well what she thought of the whole kit and caboodle of 'high society' and was likely betting that she'd send Malfoy off with a flea in his ear. Preferably with a whole colony of fleas.

But Lucius was not about to leave without pressing his case. "You, Miss Granger, are engaged in any number of schemes to better the lot of various magical species. I have my own opinions on your efforts, but they are of no importance to this particular discussion beyond the truth that your greatest opposition to *any* plan you concoct is and will be the pure-blooded witches and wizards who still make up a majority of our society. If you wish to have the least chance of success, you must convince them to support you, and to do so, you must play their games."

Hermione bit her lip to stop herself from exclaiming that it wasn't fair. No, it wasn't. *Life* was not fair, and the world did not run on anyone's set of idealized principles. What ought to be rarely changed what *was*. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," she murmured.

He gave her an odd look. "Precisely. Knowing how to act and react in certain situations, knowing how they think, will give you a better chance to enlist aid. It is true that once you return to your customary person, you will no longer be able to claim the bond of kinship, but I will give you all of the tools you *can* wield as a Muggle-born witch."

He had a point. But she was angry, and if she stopped to think about it, she would have to admit that she felt betrayed. She was in no condition to play Slytherin games with Lucius Malfoy. He needed her for this (damn them *both* for involving her), which gave her the upper hand, but only for so long as she could maintain it. She needed time, time and information. "I will consider your proposal, Mister Malfoy," she declared in her best Ministry manner, "but I must insist that you provide me with a copy of your programme. I will need to know how you plan to accomplish this little... game... before I agree to it."

He had recognised that a strategic retreat was in order, and left with all of the smarmy grace he could muster.

Hermione had kept her temper for just long enough to soundproof her office, then let fly.

It was much, much later, when she had returned to her flat, fed herself and her cat, and settled in with several pints of ice cream chilling on an end table, that she examined her feelings. And when she got right down to it, it was a very simple equation. She hated being manipulated, used, and talked about instead of to. Severus knew this, and for the past several years, she had considered him a friend. He'd betrayed the trust she had in him, and that fucking hurt. Therefore, she was angry.

And Lucius was probably banking on that anger to push her into going along with his plans. She barely knew the man, so it didn't hurt, but it made her all the angrier. After all, hadn't she suffered enough because of him and his family and their bloody beliefs? She was prepared to live and let live, when all had been said and done, but couldn't he leave well enough alone?

Crookshanks ploughed into her lap, demanding the attention due him. Hermione obliged, and after a great deal of petting and scratching and fur shedding, she decided she would read through every damn clause of that betting contract. And, if she thought she might agree, she would find some way to make Malfoy pay through the nose.

Figuring out what to do about Severus would wait. She needed to figure out precisely what he thought he was doing and what he got out of this bet. And revenge was all the better if he spent several months on tenterhooks waiting for it.

It was probably the wrong decision, and Hermione couldn't really point to an argument in its favour, but after wringing out some concrete promises from Lucius...including future support for legislation of her choosing and a share in the winnings should she succeed...Hermione consented to become Sage de Malfoy, a cousin from a Swiss branch of the astonishingly widespread Malfoy family.

Lucius apparently believed in total immersion, and as per his outline, the changes in Hermione's life were swift and nearly all-encompassing. She retained her position at the Ministry, naturally, but she essentially moved in to Malfoy Manor, telling her friends...and Severus...that she was, for the foreseeable future, 'going Muggle.' This was not unusual for her; Hermione had occasionally stayed with Muggle friends, eschewing magic for the duration. Harry teasingly called it 'staying in touch with her roots'; Hermione considered it a sensible precaution.

The move itself was a difficult task to accomplish; she had never had reason to cross the Malfoy threshold since the Bad Old Days, and those sorts of memories were still strong. However, both Lucius and Narcissa walked her through the parts of the house she was unpleasantly familiar with and housed her in the family wing, which was far cosier and quite distant from the places she didn't want to remember. And it was Scorpius who thoughtfully donated his most beloved teddy bear to his new 'cousin' to keep her company in the night. Hermione was fascinated by the charms she discovered woven into the plush creature, but in the interests of personal privacy disabled all but the one that returned him to the bed if he was knocked off by the sleeper. Narcissa also made a point of having very ordinary sorts of family gatherings in 'that room,' and gradually, Hermione's nightmares were replaced by more mundane memories of afternoon tea with Narcissa and Astoria and comfortable family evenings after dinner.

The house elves were another tricky proposition, and it took many hours to train Hermione to ignore them properly. The elves, too, had to be appeased by a solemn promise not to give them clothes, which Hermione tempered with the compromise that if she were pleased with their service by the time the three months was up, she would instead give them ordinary household appliances.

But just after the move and before the rest was accomplished, one of the most important tasks was embarked upon: the acquisition of an appropriate wardrobe. In Paris, of course.

"A pureblood witch," Narcissa lectured, "is always sure enough of herself to dress as she pleases, but she will always choose the best possible means by which to do so. And for a Malfoy, Sage, that is *Paris*. I trust my robemakers implicitly"...and Hermione had to admit that the older witch was entirely justified..."so you may make your own choices between the two of you; I shall not interfere. I would suggest, my dear Sage," and here she eyed her companion, who was a bit shabby by comparison, "that you choose to be a little less utilitarian; it may help in your current ambition to distance yourself from... your former self."

"I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble," Hermione apologised sheepishly. She had no argument with the cool Narcissa Malfoy, and she had assumed that the bet would

involve making only Lucius Malfoy suffer; she'd no idea that he'd drag in the entire family. And aside from some mild ribbing from Draco, they'd acquiesced with surprisingly good grace.

Narcissa waved away the apology. "If anything, Sage, the debt is on our side. You did a great deal for our family at the end of the War, and we have never thanked you properly. Indeed, it was poorly done of Lucius to make you the subject of a gentleman's wager, though perhaps this *is* his convoluted means of benefiting you. However," she added with a small, smug smile, "I am taking this opportunity to refresh my own wardrobe at the same time as you...and also at Lucius's expense."

Hermione laughed. Even marriage was an exercise in Slytherin power politics.

The sojourn in Paris was brief, but demanding. The sessions at the robemakers...and the milliners and the shoemakers and the select establishment that produced the most remarkable undergarments that performed functions Hermione had never even considered...were intense, with far more attention paid to her preferences and her measurements than had ever been considered at Madam Malkin's ("Did you never notice that only Draco ever went there, Sage, and only for uniforms?") There were flying robes with split skirts and wrist-tied sleeves, brewing robes with close-fitting skirts to keep them away from cauldron flames, and comfortable house robes that draped themselves beautifully when she sat down, even if she perched on a stair railing. She was slightly appalled to discover the weakness for lace, as well as a partiality to ribbons. And witch's hats, she discovered, were actually surprisingly useful. A flying hat kept every hair in place, even in gale force winds. A brewing hat collected loose hairs before they could fall into a cauldron. Everyday hats could invisibly store a number of small, useful items in the hatband, like a witch's chatelaine. There were even hats that would style her hair for her if she were in a hurry (and didn't require anything elaborate).

And Hermione couldn't even begin to rhapsodize over her bespoke footwear and undies.

As for accessories? Suffice it to mention that they included matching carry bags to allow the aging Crookshanks to travel comfortably on her broom.

Hermione spent her little free time exploring the ancient city, and while she could not say she *loved* it, she found places she would not have missed for the world.

And upon her return to England, she looked and felt like a whole new witch.

Throughout it all...and this was, perhaps, the most important lesson...was Hermione's observation of all the little, automatic uses the Malfoys made of their magic. If Narcissa wanted something put away...even in a cabinet not three feet away...she did not pick it up and move it, nor even wave it into place with her wand; she snapped her fingers to summon a house elf. Astoria might jostle little Cassiopeia on her hip, but the baby's garments were charmed to make her lighter to carry. Neither woman thought anything of rearranging a room's furniture in the morning, flying off on a jaunt in the afternoon, and then rearranging it again on their return...all with a whim and a wand. And while the Weasley's might have a family clock, Narcissa had an heirloom lapel watch that had different chimes for each member of the family and their specific situation. Hermione absorbed everything she could, well aware that even applying too much force with her dinner knife might cut through the plate as well as her beef Wellington and give her away as an impostor.

Lucius became her tutor in more obvious areas of study. To begin with, he provided her with a genealogy of the Malfoy family and the essential branches of twenty other pureblooded families to memorise. The Malfoy collections of magical objects were extensive, and he began taking her through all of them, lecturing her on each one. He pointed out the ones that were recognisable by most purebloods, but insisted that as a Malfoy, she would be familiar with them all. Hermione spent every spare minute she could discover or manufacture in studying her notes; it was probably unintentional, but he made her feel even more ignorant than she had as a child entering Hogwarts, and she *hated* feeling ignorant.

What was worse were the flying lessons. Professor Hooch had been lousy as an instructor to new flyers, and Hermione had always taken to the air with a deeply rooted conviction that she did not know what she doing and an awareness that *not* knowing could very well get her killed. But Lucius was adamant that *every* pureblooded witch and wizard knew their way around a broomstick and no Malfoy...nor yet a de Malfoi...had ever maintained a fear of heights. She would *not*, he averred, be the first. He took her up time and again, only to have things fall apart the moment she rose above the height of a second story building. After a week of trial and failure, Lucius came up with a rather effective cure: he took the young woman up on a tandem broom (oh, those lovely days spent courting Cissa...) and proved to her, unannounced, that she could bounce as well or better than Neville Longbottom.

Hermione required any number of coffee liqueurs and chocolate cakes to recover from the shock, after which Lucius required several days to recover from her recovery.

She did, however, learn to fly properly, and was introduced to the favourite pureblood pastime of the night hunt. They were no longer a necessity, as vampires were largely under control, but the tame sport of Quidditch hardly compared to the blood-thrill of barrelling through a dense forest under the white-shadowed light of a full moon at top speed after a nearly invisible bat. And how proud you were of yourself when you caught it! Hermione's...Sage's...first was accorded the due honour of becoming one of the Manor's colony and remanded to her personal care. She named the tiny creature (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*) 'Otto' and after a bit of instruction, trained him to 'come' using a charm-produced ultrasonic 'tune.'

But for every high point like Otto, there was a great deal of hard work in memorization, observation, and practice, and there were just as many, if not more, low points. Hermione learned of the darker sides of pureblood history: vendettas that rivalled Italian legends, honour killings of witches and wizards who dared to marry into Muggle families, the ruthless subjugation and annihilation of numerous magical species. And she saw that the Malfoys *accepted* them as a matter of course. They had happened once, and they could happen again as far as the families involved were concerned and nobody would turn a hair...except for the Mudbloods and Muggles, who would be losing their heads. Hermione herself was outraged, but could not, as Sage de Malfoi, even make a peep of objection.

Hermione's life was also becoming increasingly fragmented and distorted. She spent her days as Hermione Granger: war heroine, book worm, social crusader. She was someone who despised everything the 'pure' families stood for and would take no nonsense about superiority or blood rights. Her nights and weekends were spent as Sage de Malfoi, the young scion of centuries of selective breeding, a woman who *knew* herself to be better than anyone and who took her powers and pleasures as an implicit right.

It didn't help that to maintain the distinction, she was forced to bottle Sage up into a Pensieve during the day. The knowledge that more and more of her 'self' was absent for ten hours or more a day took its toll on her psyche. There were days when she wasn't quite sure who she was, days when she felt the loss of memories acutely, and still others when the effort of reabsorbing the memories would lay her out for longer and longer periods of time. And if she wasn't careful, Hermione discovered, there were days when Sage's memories overwhelmed her, and Hermione disappeared almost entirely. The charade was becoming dangerous, and Hermione often wondered why she was continuing to pursue it. No bet was worth it, no matter the stakes, no matter what she felt she had to prove. And would it be so awful if she allowed Sage to be a part of her days, to integrate the two diverging personalities, one of which was an assumed role that was becoming increasingly, almost frighteningly, real? After all, what could anyone *really* discover just from watching her during the day? Even if Severus legitimized her...

And there the anger would arise, and the hurt, and Hermione's determination to prove them all wrong would take precedence over everything. And the days split in two would continue...

Until tonight. For the final time, Hermione had reunited her memories and felt the two settle into her head together, merging and melding and giving her a damned intense headache. She looked into the mirror, found herself questioning and resolved, and then she knew nothing more, for her world went black.

Severus had not been looking forward to the evening, unless it was to witness Lucius's spectacular failure. He had attended pureblood soirees before, and always found them tedious at best. It was difficult to enjoy the company when each member of it was intent on sneering at you in 'sophisticated' and 'civilized' ways. But he had noted the 'fail not' undertones in the invitation, and he was curious enough to want to know first hand exactly what would give Hermione away. Would it be a deficiency in Lucius's tutelage, or the effects of her own bull-headed common sense? Would she make such an obvious slip as to mention a film or would it be as subtle as neglecting to cast the correct charm as the ladies retired to the drawing room after supper? She might, he conceded to himself...rather graciously as he thought...pass for a less monied pureblood, one who 'slummed,' as they thought it, with half-bloods and Muggleborn, but Hermione Granger was too strong of a woman...of a personality...to allow herself to

be subsumed into a role.

As 'Sage de Malfoy,' this was a welcoming party rather than a debut, for she had come of age some time ago on the Continent, and so her entrance was made quietly with the family instead of a grand descent from the front staircase, and she was introduced personally by the Master of the house. Severus received the impression of hair to rival Lucius's for colour and an appallingly bright robe that Hermione would never have worn in a million years...if then. As the niceties were observed, Severus arranged the ongoing services of a house elf in the line of drink and settled into a neglected corner to observe them.

It was some hours into the soiree before Lucius finally guided the young woman over to him. "And this, my dear Sage, is Master Severus Snape, former Headmaster of Hogwarts and hero of the late war. Severus, I would like to present my cousin, Sage de Malfoy."

In prescribed fashion, they proffered their wand hands, held them palm to palm exactly an inch away from each other, and bowed. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master Snape."

It was her voice that truly caught his attention, being deeper and richer than her usual tones and perfectly possessed of that unmistakable Malfoy drawl...educated and assured that the listener is dying to attend every syllable. His eyes snapped to her face.

There was not the least hint of recognition in her eyes. The face was one he had seen for countless hours; she had proved the most compatible with his legitimacy...as well as the most willing...and so had served as his voice for the unending days he had spent recuperating from Nagini's violence. As Sage, her eyes were as black as his own and just as cool as his had ever been. There was at best polite cordiality, without a hint of the vivacious woman he'd spent so many evenings with over the past several years. It was almost reflex to reach out to her with his mind, and as chilling as a haunted ice house to discover an entirely new mental signature...one that was intent on keeping him out. But Lucius was already escorting her away, reserving one last, smugly raised eyebrow for his friend and erstwhile comrade.

Snape's lips thinned, and...rules of propriety be damned...he palmed his wand, discreetly casting a series of revelatory spells. He found nothing, no hint that Lucius might have applied glamours or dark charms or anything else that could explain why Mlle. de Malfoy held no hint of Hermione Granger. All he received for his troubles was a deep sense of disquiet...and a suspicious, narrowed gaze from the lady in question.

He was left to fret by himself the next day, for he had not been invited to stay at the Manor, nor to any of the day's teas, gathering parties (wherein the ladies looked for herbs whilst the men risked their necks for more exotic potions ingredients), or courting flights. Severus was not accustomed to 'fretting' and angrily turned away from his current potions experiment in favour of (complaining to himself all the way) flying into Oxford to consult the magical library there. The result of his researches was as fruitless as his spellcasting the night before; there was no spell, charm, hex, potion, or otherwise known to wizardkind that could produce the effect he had observed in Hermione without leaving a trace that he would have detected. Sage de Malfoy was not a clone, nor a doppelganger, nor the result of a transplanted conscious. She was not undead. She was... Sage. Hermione was simply... not there.

Snape, being Snape, had no problem with breaking etiquette and arriving at Malfoy Manor uninvited and early the following morning. Most of the family was still abed, as the previous evening had been another late one. 'Milly Sage' was, according to a house elf, awake, however, and taking a cup of tea and a scone in the morning room. Snape strode by without bothering to wait to hear if she would receive callers or for the house elf to announce him. He did manage to refrain from bursting through the door like an Auror after a Niffler and enter like a semi-civilised human being.

Sage looked up, and the barest hint of emotion swept across her face before it smoothed into polite interest. "Good morning, Master Snape. It is a surprise to see you here at this hour, but not an unpleasant one. Please, have a seat. I'll have Morrie fetch you some refreshment." There was no hesitation, no compunction, as she summoned the elf and gave her orders.

Almost it was Narcissa at her best, but without the myriad subtle shadings of tone and inflection that the older woman used to indicate the emotion she wished to convey. For instance, Narcissa would undoubtedly be annoyed at this intrusion into an otherwise personal time of day, and she would have lightly emphasised the 'good' and the 'surprise.' And the lady might very well 'forget' to offer him a chair, at least until the house elf, signalled in some arcane manner to slowness, had returned with cooling tea and scones without clotted cream or jam. Aside from veiling her initial emotions, Sage had resorted to no such subterfuge. She might be opaque, but she, as would Hermione, would not be subtle.

The young woman chatted amicably, and he responded in kind with the growing feeling that he was fencing with, not a person as such, but with a brick wall. He feinted, retreated, made the odd thrust in an effort to garner some sort of information on who this creature was. Sage seemingly ignored each and every move with an oblivion that was a match for the dullest first-year he'd ever taught...which was not to say that her conversation was equally baffle-brained. Indeed, she proved herself an intelligent, clever conversationalist with a greater willingness to listen without argument than Hermione Granger and without her penchant for encyclopaedic repetition. (Hermione knew better at her age, naturally, but she could *not*, for reasons known only to herself, stop her recitations once she started. It was one of her more maddening characteristics, and one he put his foot down on every time she indulged.) With little else to fall back on, he steered the conversation to Potions, and began catechising her. Faster and faster his questions came, and she rapped back the answers with equal speed and perfect poise.

"Where is Hermione Granger?" he snapped.

She blinked in apparent bemusement. "Pardon?" she asked. "I'm sorry, Master Snape, but you've caught me out of book; should I know where she is? I'm afraid I only know of her by hearsay; I would assume she is at whatever job she has chosen to pursue, though what that is, I'm afraid I have never bothered to find out. Switzerland is somewhat removed from your internal conflicts, you know."

Snape wanted to scream. He wanted to seize her by the shoulders and shake her until her eyes rolled in their sockets. He wanted to force-feed her Veritaserum until it was coming out her nose. He wanted...

He wanted to do the same to Lucius Malfoy. *Damn* that misbegotten son of a Ficklering. He'd liquored him into that bloody bet, and Snape was *certain* he'd somehow contravened the conditions. What was this... thing he'd produced?

He nearly leapt from his chair at the touch of a hand on his wrist, and *Mlle. Sage* found herself with a wand at her temple. "Master Snape," she said. "You are becoming overwrought. Is there anything I can do to help?"

He snatched his hand away and jammed his wand back into its sheath. "No."

With a cool look, she retreated and stood. "Perhaps a stroll in the gardens, then. There are some ingredients that need to be harvested for this afternoon's brewing party, and I would be negligent not to take advantage of the skills of such a renowned practitioner of the art. Besides, if you choose to yell at me instead of simply cracking Narcissa's best china, you won't wake the entire household."

Snape flushed an ugly maroon and rose from his chair. He hadn't had such an embarrassing lapse since he was recuperating and had venom to blame for shattering glass windows and splintering oak furniture. Scowling, he watched and waited as Sage instructed Morrie to fetch her harvesting basket. She wore her hair in a low knot, something Hermione, with her masses upon masses of unruly curls generally couldn't manage. Or if she could wrestle her hair into submission, it wasn't the simple, sleek creation that (though he didn't recognise it consciously) called attention to her profile. And the robes, like the peacock blue of her welcome ball, were something he'd never think to see Hermione wear. Rich, dark, purple velvet caught up under her bust. Long...they just allowed for the tips of her shoes to be seen and formed a train at the back that always settled in perfect folds around her feet. High necked, for the mornings were cool, which again brought attention up to the pallor of her face and hair. Loose sleeves slashed in medieval style to reveal ecru lining. They were cuffed halfway to her elbow; they would not interfere with harvesting.

Hermione, to his knowledge, possessed four robes: one for work, in Ministry-encouraged rusty black, one for everyday wear in russet, one ratty, tatty one to work in that defied any description of its current or original colour, and one dark amber silk that appeared once a year for the Memorial Ball. With the exception of the amber silk, they all appeared unremarkable and utilitarian to his eyes, and even the amber...though flattering, if he recalled it correctly...was along fairly restrained lines. If she owned anything

else, anything pretty or frivolous, she certainly hadn't worn it around *him*.

Well, he'd hardly have encouraged such a thing, now, would he? His own wardrobe was scarcely more extensive, and it came in one colour...black...and one cut...severe.

She jostled him from his frowning reverie by offering him a hat...her own, a broad-brimmed straw that matched her hair and was trimmed with a purple ribbon, was already upon her head...and a second basket. He accepted them wordlessly and clumped after her through the French doors, suddenly feeling as awkward and gangly as he had at sixteen.

Whatever else she had or didn't have of Hermione Granger, Sage certainly had her skills. Severus was not so wrong-footed that he neglected to observe the competent ease with which she handled silver sickle and golden scissors and later, cauldron flame and stirring rod. She carried on two or three tasks simultaneously and was yet able to maintain a sensible conversation with the younger Malfoys and their set, who were among those who had been invited to the party. He *knew* that method of slicing marshmallow root; he'd taught it to her, drilled her through countless hours until she'd cried with exhaustion and closed their mental link to shut out his continual demands that she do it again. And there was the way her pinkie crooked up when she wielded the tiny sickle, like a society aunt with a tea cup. A thousand little quirks and habits he'd observed, but never particularly paid attention to before, marked her plainly as a student of his, and further, as Hermione Granger.

He wasn't sure if he should be relieved to know that she was, in fact, present somehow in Sage de Malfoi's body, or even more... alarmed... to know that she had somehow been sublimated into Sage.

Who was now part of a circle of brewing tables, trading gibes with Draco and appearing far more animated than he'd seen her for...years? decades? Of course, he had to remember that he only ever saw Hermione under certain sets of circumstances, none of which were conducive to any sort of *joie de vivre*. Did she laugh like that with her friends? He was never around *them*; both he and she knew he couldn't stand them, and vice versa. He'd seen her smile. And grin and smirk. But he wasn't the sort of man who encouraged or induced laughter; he never had been. Severus began to feel old, and for the first time, wondered if she should be spending as much time as she did with him. Shouldn't she be out and about, doing whatever it was that young people did?

"Sage has had a good teacher, don't you think?" Narcissa, looking as fresh and nearly as young as she ever had in rose pink robes, had finished her brewing tasks and deserted her table to stand beside him.

"Of course," he replied, slightly nettled that she felt the need to mention it. "Her basic skills are the equal of any Master, though she doesn't have the soul of one."

"No," Narcissa agreed. "That *is* something that is truly born in a witch...or not, in this case. And she has confessed that she knows it, too. Curious, isn't it, that she spends such a great deal of time as a brewing assistant?"

"What are you driving at, Cissa?" Severus asked wearily. The day had grown longer and longer, and he was feeling older by the second. He hadn't the least desire to fence with her.

"Simply an observation, Severus." The witch tapped the brooches that held her sleeves back, allowing them to fall over her wrists. "I have not had the opportunity to get to know the girl previously. I find her quite an interesting witch and very refreshing. Our society has become a trifle stale over the years, I suppose. And she has a very nice way with Scorpius as well." Sage sighed inwardly. The last thing he wanted was a catalogue of Scorpius's latest achievements. Was there some sort of pathogen that babies and small children carried that rendered every action...particularly those involving bodily functions...fascinating to their female relatives? "Well, Severus, if you'll excuse me, I have to see that the elves are prepared to store the potions from today. As you know, the headache potion's almost done."

He nodded, and watched Hermione...Sage...drop the required crab apple core into her cauldron.

Severus realised that evening, just as the ladies were retiring from the dinner table, that those few exchanged sentences from Narcissa had put him at ease. He still didn't *like* the situation, but he believed he knew Narcissa fairly well after all these years, and her opinion of Lucius's wagers was generally quite clear. She might be annoyed with her husband for making the wager in the first place (and this was something she would keep to herself), but her demeanour was such that Severus knew she had accepted it. She even seemed to be enjoying the drama to some degree. Which would not be the case if Lucius had resorted to extreme measures that could conceivably land him in Azkaban for the rest of his natural life just to win a bet. In that event, Narcissa would transform into the harpy that seemed to lurk inside every married woman, and she would probably have contrived to keep Lucius locked in the cellars until his fit of madness had passed. There had been that quite amusing week in the fall of his fourth teaching year... Lucius had emerged from the Manor looking like some ersatz Viking, or perhaps a blond Edmond Dantès post-Château d'If. But he'd emerged a more reasonable wizard...and still enough of a diva to play up the beard for all it was worth until Narcissa finally made him remove it.

That didn't rule out the possibility of *Hermione* doing something drastic, but Snape did have more faith in her common sense now than he'd had when she was sixteen.

Didn't he?

"A glass of brandywine, Master Snape?"

His eyes flicked up; he been staring at the fire, away from the well-mannered conversations and courting couples. Had she been conversing or trying her hand at courting? Either way, she stood now just a little left of his direct line of vision, proffering a glass of the red-amber liquid. The firelight played along the lines of her robes, darkened their white-blonde hair with a cinder-orange hue. "I thought we might talk," she added.

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

A thoroughly Gallic shrug. "I like talking to you." She wanded over an ottoman and surprisingly, sank down to the floor, leaving her glass and his on the plush surface and leaning against it, her head resting along her arm. The dark russet silk she wore...would it just match her real hair?...pooled around her, and from this angle, he became very aware of the gold lace that bordered what was laughingly called a neckline. Her eyes regarded him candidly.

"What... do you want to talk about?"

She smiled...a child's smile, genuine and winsome. Softly, she said, "'Shoes and ships and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings.' Whatever you like, Master Snape."

"And if I don't want to talk of anything?" Even to his ears, he sounded surly, ungracious. ...Normal.

"Then we shall sit here in silence and listen to the fire. I will drink my brandywine and look at you. You may do as you please, naturally."

"You are a strange witch."

Her lips twitched. "And are you not a strange wizard? We shall rub along together well, then." He felt the corners of his own mouth quirk in amusement.

Silence did follow, and Severus did not move. He sipped from his glass, savoured the thick, sweet liquid that sent little burning tendrils through him. Even the murmur of the conversations in the rest of the room seemed to retreat into the distance, and Severus found himself content to simply be. Though Sage did as she had warned, she did not stare, and he found himself undisturbed when she did choose to rest her gaze on him. She did not judge. She did not demand. She simply wanted to look at him. (Which was an odd thing in itself; nobody would ever consider him particularly aesthetic.) He found that he, occasionally, wanted to look at her.

It was when that final drop of brandywine was gone that Severus finally craned his head around the wings of his chair. "We're alone," he remarked with some surprise.

"Mm?" Sage blinked sleepy eyes at him. "Oh. Yes. They left ages ago."

"Did they." He frowned. It was remiss of the Malfoys not to have left a chaperone; Sage was a young witch in their care.

One who seemed to intuit what he was thinking. "I'm not that young, Severus," she murmured, rising to her feet. "And they trust you." She laid her hand over the one he had resting on the chair's arm. "They trust *me*." She leaned over, pressed a gentle, heavy kiss upon his forehead. "Good night, Severus Snape. Dream well."

He listened to the rustle of her robes, the humble snick of the door latch, the slight tump of the door closing behind her. He remained, watching the flames dance, his mind troubled.

The remainder of the week passed, and with surprising suddenness, it was over. There was no shock of recognition or humiliating unmasking; there was no grand reveal or amused unveiling. The Malfoys simply put it about that Sage was returning to Switzerland, and the various members of the Darkwand, Spellwind, Fitzroy, Black, Avalons, and other families expressed their gratitude for the Malfoys' hospitality. Some of them expressed a wish to correspond with the young lady, and it was promised that their requests would be passed on. Finally, there was only the family left...and Severus Snape, who had been expressly invited for the final day.

"I believe I've won the bet, old man." Lucius looked irritatingly smug, but Severus was forced to agree.

"I'll brew the damned potions for you. Just send me the list of what you want."

"I will."

Sage...or Hermione...was nowhere in sight. Severus had to be content with that.

It was the usual time on the usual day, but Severus was still surprised to hear the bell ring and to find the young woman on his doorstep. Her hair was back to its rampant bushiness...and was quite a bit shorter as a consequence...but was still that shade of Malfoy blonde. Her eyes were once again the dark, warm amber he was accustomed to, but her robes were the brilliant Irish green she'd worn the afternoon of the brewing party. "Which one are you?" he asked bluntly.

Hermione flinched a little to hear the harsh note in his voice. It was something that hadn't been directed at her since the very first days of their Legilimancy bond, when she'd made it clear that if he wanted her to continue, he had to, at the very least, not take his temper out on her. "Hermione," she replied, "if you want a simple answer. Both, if you want the most truthful answer." She recalled to her mind the fury she'd felt, and it made it easier to be casual. She was still a trifle unsettled in her own body after last week's escapades, and around Severus, she needed to be very aware of what she did and said...and how. "Check, if you'd like," and she looked him quite candidly in the eye.

He had that closed expression on his face, the one he wore when he didn't want to let on what he was thinking. But he had neglected to close off that little chink in his mental wards that was keyed to her, and with only a brief touch, she knew for a certainty that the man had read far too many of the drivel romance scrolls that were passed around by hormonal students. He was wondering if her offer was some sort of magical trap...or some sort of trap to prove whether or not he trusted her. Well, she was certainly annoyed now. "Will you at least let me in instead of making me stand here on your front stoop like some ruddy Jehovah's Witness? Or would it make you feel better if that rainstorm on its way dumped a bucket of water on my head?"

With that, he swooped forward, grabbed her chin, and she felt the full, welcome, spiky warmth of his mind against hers. She smiled. "It's good to see you, too, Severus. I've missed you. Now let me in, you bloody pillock."

It was easier to talk while they were brewing; the actions were familiar, their rapport in the lab established. Mental requests to 'pass the bowl' or 'julienne that' were casually tossed in amidst the vocal conversation.

"Well," Hermione said, "the superficial aspects are the easiest to explain. I bought coloured contacts for my eyes; I'm simply not wearing them any more. We charmed my hair while I was learning what I needed to know, but I had it dyed and straightened by a Muggle hairdresser when it came time to foil any nasty little charms the others might send my way...which they did. Lorelei Sneachta in particular seemed determined to prove that it was a glamour. It's just been too much of a bother to put it back to normal just yet. And the clothes?"

"I like them. Narcissa told me what I 'needed,' but I chose the styles to please *me*. I'd never realised the options I had before now." She ignored that ungentlemanly snort that came from the direction of the cauldron. "As to the more complicated aspects..." Hermione summarised the process that Lucius had put her through, which lasted throughout the evening's necessary steps in Severus's experimental Veritas serum and into the *mise en place* for the more prosaic pain potion he needed for days when lingering venom made its presence known. On several occasions, it was just as well Severus could brew with a steady hand in a hurricane on an active fault line.

When she'd reached the appropriate point, she turned to the last hours that 'Hermione' remembered. "In using the Penseive...which *wasn't* hazardous, I'll have you know; I researched it thoroughly...I'd created a distinct line between my memories and Sage's, and in a way, a distinct divergence between our two personalities. We're essentially the same person, but Sage is the woman I would have been if I had been born a pureblooded witch. She's more conscious of her rights and privileges, and somewhat more ruthless in pursuit of her aims. In those last few moments before we were to go downstairs, she took over.

"It was an odd feeling," Hermione mused. "Like being asleep and having lucid dreams. I didn't have any direct control over what was occurring, but I didn't have any objections to what she was doing, either. She was me, and she was doing things the way I would have done them under Lucius's tutelage. The real difference was that she ran far less risk of making a fatal mistake."

"She pretended not to know me," Severus grouched. *Pass me the willow bark.*

Hermione handed him the shredded pile. "She didn't know you, if you think about it. I know you, of course, and she knew of you through me, but *she'd* never met you before.

"In any case, that first night was on a sudden inspiration on her part; I returned to full consciousness that night, and once we integrated properly, we...or I, it's kind of muddled at this point...decided that it was an appropriate tactic to employ. 'Hermione' went dormant last week, which was why you couldn't detect my mental signature, and 'Sage' ruled the roost. It's a little complicated to explain it all in words...it's all about feeling, really...but we've integrated back into one personality now, the way we would be if I had gone through this whole experience normally. I retain all of Sage's memories and emotions and who I am now is how those events have shaped me.

"And it's been fascinating, Severus. I understand Purebloods far more than I ever considered possible, and I've learned any number of things that I'd never have considered as a Muggle-born. There's a lot I can't wait to bring to the table at work," and here she grinned like a shark.

"I'm so glad you consider this a valuable learning experience," her companion sniped. His mind was silent, and Hermione only passed him the crushed scarab legs because she knew he needed them. There was another moment, tense and quiet, before he bellowed, "Do you have any idea what you might have done to yourself?!"

Hermione looked him coolly in the eye. "I do. I realise that everything might have gone pear-shaped. But I did my research, considered the options, weighed the pros and cons. And what it all came down to, Severus, was that I was always ever the only person in my head. I control my destiny. And I am a grown woman who is capable of making these informed decisions for myself, contrary to what some over-controlling prats may believe. I do not need to be shoved or bullied or coerced into courses of action that are supposed to be the 'best' for me.

"I don't think it occurred to either of you that I might have agreed of my own free will to study under Lucius if only the two of you had given me the option up front. That none of this rigmarole was actually necessary."

Snape's face reddened, though she couldn't determine if it was mounting ire or embarrassment.

"I think part of Sage's motivation for taking over," she mused, "was, in fact, to make you sweat. Childish, perhaps, but she was quite aware of my feelings on the matter."

"And that final farce?" Snape growled. "Was that part of her petty revenge?"

It was only long-ingrained habit that kept Hermione stirring the last three turns the potion required before she could put it in stasis. "If you think it was a farce, then there's no more to be said."

"That's not an answer."

"If that's a question you have to ask, that's the only answer you're getting."

"Damn it, woman..."

"And if you're going to talk to me like that, than that's *certainly* my cue to leave." She stripped off the spell that kept her sleeves back and unclipped her apron.

"Damn it, Hermione!" Severus grabbed for her elbow and pulled her to him, her chin landing in his hand. She glared at him.

"Do it, and one of us will *not* be walking out of here," she stated flatly. He never had, except with her express permission.

"Just answer the bloody question!" he roared, and Hermione flinched away from the fine spray of spittle.

She used her free hand to flick some of it off her cheek. "Answer it yourself," she hissed. It was surprisingly easy to slip her arm from his grip.

And she was gone.

There was a hole in his existence. A Hermione-shaped hole that he had never truly noticed. Never noticed how large a space she had occupied in his life, how various strands of her had intertwined themselves with him and knotted tightly. For fuck's sake, he only saw the chit twice a week!

Which was at least twice as often as he (voluntarily) saw anyone else, he was forced to admit to himself.

And between her antics as Sage and her complete withdrawal over the past few weeks, he was also forced to realise the strength and depth of their mental bond. It had begun out of perceived necessity. Afterwards, it was because she was one of the only people he knew he could trust; he had indulged that weak part of himself that craved the attention and validation, and she had allowed it. She had admired and respected him (though quite often, and quite reasonably, she hadn't very much *liked* him), and he had wallowed in that approbation. He had been deep within her mind only a few times, and with her consent, but they had maintained a light contact for much longer than he cared to think about, and only now were the effects of that becoming apparent. Snape missed that contact. He'd always known where Hermione was, in a general sort of way, and that if he cared or needed to, he could send out a thought for her to 'hear.' It came to him that he'd known when she was on the Continent, and he was shocked at that their connection had been maintained over that kind of distance. But now she had vanished from his head, and the *not* knowing was eating at him.

She was perfectly fine, he told himself irritably, turning his mind back to the complex transformative potion that Lucius had included on his list of winnings. It was five p.m. on Wednesday; she would be at that tea shop in Bristol he'd introduced her to, picking up her week's supply of the best they had to offer. She'd then apparate home and brew a fresh cuppa of whatever she'd picked up while fixing dinner for that cantankerous beast she called a cat.

She had *not* been ambushed by Dark wizards. She had *not* been run over by a Muggle vehicle. She probably didn't even have a parchment cut!

But she wouldn't give him a little nudge, either, telling him to put down his potions vials and share that cuppa, 'cause she'd made too much for this late in the day.

Would it be Darjeeling this week? Assam? Gunpowder green?

Or would that newfound side of her, the one that had expensive robes and an assuredness that bordered on arrogance, change her routine? Perhaps she was out with the bloody Darkwand brat, drinking wine from Fitzroy's cellars.

It was all her fault, anyway, that little blonde chit. She'd changed the status quo on him, put thoughts in his head that had no business being there. Taken Hermione away from him.

Showed him what her lips felt like on his skin.

Given him that glimpse of her as a woman.

A woman who, as Hermione or as Sage, always knew what she wanted.

Hermione didn't always think she could get it. Sage *knew* she could.

He was supposed to be concentrating on the damned potion.

Oh, to hell with it.

Hermione landed in her back garden with just the barest hint of a thump. Grinning, she tipped up the flat cap she wore for flying, allowing her hair to spill down and around her shoulders. She dismounted and herded the broom...a high end, though not a luxury or sports, model that was another of her Malfoy perks...forward. A slight movement caught her eye, and she snapped her wand into her hand a split second before recognising the black column as Severus. She bit her lip and hauled back on her mind, which wanted to leap to meet his like an overeager puppy on its master's return.

"You hate flying," he said.

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Lucius made certain I learned properly."

Silence.

"I'm sorry."

Hermione's broom clattered to the ground as her focus shattered. "I don't think I've ever heard you say that."

His hand made some sort of obscure gesture. "I have tried," he said, "very hard, for a very long time, *not* to do things I would feel the need to apologise for."

Picking up her broom...as well as the scattered tins of tea...masked the grin that took over her face. "As opposed to things other people feel you should apologise for."

He relaxed minutely. "Precisely."

She looked up at him from where she was restuffing her carry-bag. "And what, precisely, are you apologising for?" she asked bluntly.

He said nothing as he approached her, as he crouched down in front of her, gently removing her hand from the strap of her bag and bringing it to his face. She gasped. He had opened the doors to his mind; he was inviting her in. This time, she didn't stop her mind from making that leap forward into his. There was the familiar handshake grip that was their constant contact, the tiny hint of what was behind it that time had allowed her to see. But now his mind embraced her, and she could see so much more. Hermione looked about her in wonder and delight, seeing the knowledge he'd accumulated over the years, the dark, shadowy corners of experience that she would...for now...let alone, and the place that was hers, and hers alone, to fill. He gave her the memories and emotions and thoughts of the past few weeks, and she revelled in them, unravelling the knots that he'd tied within himself. She emerged from his mind happier and more certain than she had ever been, and laid her forehead against his. "*Oh, you dear, silly man. Help me up, and I'll put the kettle on.*" The image that accompanied her words was more: two cups of tea, a fire in the grate, a couple curled up in a tiny paradise of cushions and blankets. And woven in and around it all, mirrored and resonated within Severus's own psyche, was the complex collection of feeling that could be but palely verbalised as, "*I love you.*"

Severus offered her his hand, and together they went into the house, into the kitchen, and Hermione put the kettle on.

Author's Notes:

'Masques' was written for the 2015 sshg promptfest on lj, for this prompt by palathene (to whom I give many thanks)*Lucius boasts to Severus that he can teach any Muggleborn to pass in Pureblood high society. Severus challenges him to take on the forthright Miss Hermione Granger (SS/HG or SS & HG).* It was both a joy & a challenge to work on. I loved building a pureblood world from a British period piece mentality; I think I was Jane Austening at the time. The tricky bit was making *Pygmalion* work while nudging my 'Eliza' towards 'Colonel Pickering' rather than 'Professor Higgins' (or both, which would have been my inclination). Hermione also needed a plausible reason to accept Lucius's bargain, something which I don't think I followed through with sufficiently, being a bit pressed for time at the end. (I decided to tackle two fics for this fest.) Still, I rather like it, and I hope you readers enjoy it as well. Cheers!

Lm. Samiko.