

# Potions Master For Sale

by Soul Bound

Hogwarts is holding a Bachelor Auction, and Severus Snape happens to be a bachelor. Not for long if Hermione has anything to say about it... *\*A romantic comedy with healthy doses of angst and smut.\**

## Auction and Intrigue

Chapter 1 of 6

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**SB's Notes:** I had intended for this story to be a fun little one shot for V-Day, but it turned into a monster that, try as I did, I couldn't get finished by the big day. It's a bit late, but I hope it's a good read all the same.

This story is complete in six chapters at just over 32,000 words. Should be a fun ride for all. Since it's finished, there won't be a wait on the chapters, so feel free to sit back and enjoy this without worry of it being abandoned.

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### Auction and Intrigue

"Hogwarts is having a *what?*" Severus Snape hissed dangerously.

"A Bachelor Auction," Albus Dumbledore replied brightly, "for Valentine's Day. I think it's just the thing we need to raise morale, and... I'd be lying if I said we couldn't use the funds it would raise."

Severus stared at the man in something akin to horror. He silently hoped that someone would reveal this to be a joke, but after twenty-one years teaching at this school under the employ of Dumbledore, he knew it wasn't. This was right up the old codger's alley...

Severus gave a barely audible, agitated sigh and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Headmaster," he began but trailed off when he couldn't think of anything to say. There was only one reason Dumbledore would be telling him this, and it certainly wasn't to ask him to join the Planning Committee.

Severus was by definition Merlin help him a bachelor.

As much as he wanted to protest, violently, he already knew the battle was lost; he could no more refuse to do the old man's bidding than write a flowery sonnet to Harry Potter. But he could put up a fight. Oh, yes, he could... and he would, if only to keep his dignity intact.

He took a quick look at the Headmaster's damnably pleasant smile and rolled his eyes. *He must be loving this*, he thought. He ground his teeth and turned his gaze to the other occupant of the room, Minerva McGonagall. *She's a fairly sensible woman*, Severus thought. *Surely she finds this as ridiculous an idea as I do.* He said as much.

"Surely you don't approve of this nonsense, Professor."

McGonagall's face remained inscrutable. Severus knew what that meant; either she had no opinion on the matter, or she had already cut her losses and decided not to voice it, knowing that if she did, she'd be fighting a lost battle.

Severus had a feeling it was the latter.

Just splendid. No help there.

He decided to give it a go with the Dumbledore. "Really, Headmaster, I must protest." His voice was low and even, but both other professors knew him well enough to hear the tense edge to his voice. "This may be the worst idea you've had yet. Letting that ponce Lockhart prance around the castle and decorate for Valentine's Day was bad, but this" He had a sudden vision of himself dressed in Valentine's Day colors, being led around a frilly-looking dais to the sound of some announcer's voice... "*Bachelor number five, Severus Snape! Stay calm, ladies. He's up for grabs!*" Severus closed his eyes in an effort to shut out that horrible voice, but the voice wouldn't go away. It only got worse. "*Severus enjoys long walks around the lake, gathering Potions ingredients in the Forbidden Forest, and shaping the young minds of today. If you're nice to him, ladies, I'm sure Severus would love to teach you something...*"

Severus opened his eyes in a panic. "Albus..." he began in warning. "Albus. No." His voice took on a grave, firm tone, though he still had the look of a trapped animal. "No." He shook his head. "I won't do it."

"Oh, come now, my boy," Dumbledore said, looking distinctly amused. "It won't be as bad as all that."

Severus looked alarmed.

"I know you, Severus. I know exactly what you're thinking, and I can promise you that you won't be wearing anything but simple dress robes of your choosing."

The man was senile *and* omniscient... Fine, so no prissy-looking robes. Even so...

"I must ask you to respect my privacy," he said, trying another angle. "You know that I prefer to be left alone. I have no desire to be made a fool in some public auction for the amusement of the wizarding world. Please, Albus." He was getting desperate, and with his carefully maintained, intimidating image on the line, he wasn't above begging... a bit though, it was physically painful to do so; he was not the begging type. "My dignity is all I have," he said. He wanted to say more, but he seemed to have run out of words. He just looked at the Headmaster plaintively.

"Severus," Dumbledore said seriously, his smile disappearing, "I have no desire to see your dignity taken from you, and it is certainly not my intention to make you appear foolish."

Severus didn't know if he believed that, but Dumbledore went on.

"These last few years have been hard for all of us. The rebuilding of lives has everyone at the end of their rope. This will be a wonderful way for people to relax and enjoy themselves."

*Everyone but me.*

"Even you, Severus. I really think it will be good for you to participate. You could do with a bit of fun."

"Standing in front of a crowd of giggling twits while they decide how best to torture me is not my idea of fun," he said irritably.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Nonsense. You're being dramatic. As I said before, I doubt it will be as bad as all that."

*You doubt?*

"Really, it will be very simple. My Planning Committee has yet to hammer out all the smaller details, but I'm certain it will be kept as dignified as possible."

This did not reassure Severus. At all.

But Severus knew he was beaten. He sighed. "You're not giving me a choice, are you...?" It wasn't a question.

Dumbledore just smiled. "All that will be required of you is to show up looking your best, refrain from hexing the other auction participants and the audience, and treat the lady who purchases an evening of your company with respect. Is that too much to ask?"

He rather thought it was, but he refrained from saying so. Instead, he ground out, "When?"

"Valentine's Day, of course, though I'll leave it up to you and the woman who wins you to decide when your date will be."

*A loophole!* Severus thought with growing hope, but Dumbledore squashed it with his next words.

"You will, of course, be required to sign a magical contract that you will fulfill the terms of the auction as soon as possible."

*Damn.* "Fine," he said coldly. Then, something occurred to him. He was surprised it hadn't entered his mind before... "Just what will I be getting out of this?"

Dumbledore only twinkled.

"If I'm going to allow myself to be used in this manner, I had sure as hell better be compensated. What's in it for me?"

"Ah, my dear boy. I think you will find there's a great deal in it for you. Now, if you'll excuse us, I have business with Professor McGonagall." And with that abysmal excuse for an answer, Severus was promptly dismissed by a wave of the old man's hand.

He left the office and marched back to his dungeon abode with a glare on his face, muttering angrily about cryptic, manipulative old fools taking advantage of his debt to them. The few people he passed noticed that he was in an even fouler mood than usual and steered clear, valuing their limbs intact and attached.

One woman, a young professor with wild, hopelessly curly hair and large, brown eyes, showed no such wisdom. She stepped through a door and into the corridor just after Severus had passed by. "Oh! Good evening, Professor Snape," she said to his back.

He froze, whirled around, and snarled, "What could possibly be good about it, Miss Granger?"

The smile she had been giving him faltered at his tone, and her warm words died on her tongue. "Oh, erm... well," she stuttered, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she looked away from him nervously.

"Nothing," he spat. "There is nothing good about it, girl, so keep your insipid greetings to yourself, and save them for someone they apply to." And with that he fixed her with a final glare and left her to stand there and wonder what had him in such a horrible mood.

Not that he was ever in a *good* mood, per se but he had recently been less acerbic towards her. They'd even managed a few polite conversations, even shared an evening fire in the staff room, sipping tea and trading the occasional comment about what they were each reading. Now, it seemed, they were back to square one.

Hermione sighed hopelessly. She had such a crush on the man, had for a few years ever since they'd worked together in the Order to bring down the Dark Lord. She'd felt in awe of him then. She'd passed her feelings for him off as a hopeless, girlish fancy; after all, what would someone like him ever see in someone like her? He was brave, powerful, intense, dark, experienced she was... not. Well, to be fair, she had courage, and she was powerful in her own right, but still... She was barely out of school, and he was a grown man, well versed in the ways of the world. What could she possibly have to offer?

That had been then. Now she felt differently.

After the Dark Lord had been defeated, Hermione had moved on with her life. When she'd returned to the newly reopened Hogwarts the fall before, her feelings for him had returned in full force. Since then, they'd only grown. She'd let herself hope that maybe she could get to know him better. Maybe he would see her as the woman she had become. She'd thought she'd been making progress, that he was finally ready to treat her with respect until tonight, that is.

*He snarled at me so easily*, she thought. *He didn't even think twice about it.*

Hermione wanted him to know how she felt to a certain extent, at least. She wanted him to know that she was interested in being his friend and maybe more, but she knew better than to just come out with it and tell him she fancied him. She knew exactly how that would go... Either he'd shoot her down and tell her that her feelings were one sided without giving them a second thought, or he simply wouldn't believe her and would think she was trying to make a fool of him; neither option appealed much to Hermione.

She thought long and hard about it for a while as she walked to her quarters. She knew that the approach she'd been taking the 'slowly but surely' approach wasn't working. It was like walking on eggshells all the time. At any minute he could lash out at her and erase any progress they'd made, like he'd done tonight. The way it had been going, she'd been giving *him* all the power. She'd approach him, and he could simply ignore her if he chose. It was just expected that she do all the work to try to bridge the gap between them, and if he simply didn't *feel* like it, she was screwed. Something had to give.

She decided a change of strategy was in order. She would make *him* come to *her*. She couldn't keep giving him all the power here, and she had to do this in a way that he would think that whatever happened was his idea. She couldn't be obvious. No, she knew that if she wanted to get to him, she had to be sneaky about it.

Maybe a lesser person would have admitted defeat, but Hermione Granger was nothing if not determined, and she knew she had to come up with a way to get him ~~see~~ her, without making it obvious that that was what she was doing.

It was time to play 'hard to get.'

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The next morning found Severus in a slightly calmer disposition. A decent night's sleep and the cup of coffee he was currently working on helped considerably. He found that as long as he didn't actively dwell on his impending doom, he was able to maintain his emotions. That wouldn't be so easy once the castle was decked in offensive shades of pink not that there was a shade of pink that was inoffensive but he decided to enjoy his sanity while he still could.

He entered the staff room and found Hermione Granger bent over a newspaper, completely oblivious to her surroundings. *Hermione Granger*, Severus thought. *Now, there is a quandary...* Severus didn't know what to make of her. She was no longer the little girl he remembered so well, bouncing up and down in her seat every time he asked a question, never deterred by his obvious disregard. No, she was grown up now, though that was the farthest Severus would let himself think on that matter; those were murky waters best avoided.

She still had the same spark for life she'd always had, the same tenacity and love of learning. The woman she'd become was someone he could bear, maybe even like if he gave it much thought. She was intelligent, though she no longer felt the need to shove her higher knowledge down every throat she encountered. She was polite and well mannered, though not exactly socially inclined. She was very... Well, that was just it; Severus didn't know if he found her completely unremarkable... or extraordinary.

He could think of nothing in particular that set her apart from everyone else other than her brilliance, but that was standard for her. Severus thought that if there ~~was~~ something extraordinary about her, it wasn't her brilliance. It was something else... something he couldn't put his finger on, some inner quality that those around her could tell was there, but could never really see. So, though he couldn't figure out what it was that made her extraordinary, he didn't think she was ordinary either... This was giving him a headache.

He realized that he was staring at her. Luckily, she hadn't seemed to notice. Severus shook his confusing thoughts away and crossed the room to take the seat next to her. She looked up briefly and tilted her chin up once to acknowledge him and then continued reading, as though he wasn't there.

Severus thought this was odd. She usually had a warm greeting and a smile for him he rarely returned either, but that wasn't the point. He considered possibilities of why her behavior would have changed and immediately remembered his words to her the night before. So, she was taking them at face value, was she? He would've thought she'd have learned to take his moods in stride. She'd never gotten angry when he lashed out at her before... Actually, as he studied her further, she didn't seem to be angry now either, just busy. She appeared relaxed, but focused. Her coloring was normal no angry flush, no flashing eyes. Again, odd. Severus came to the conclusion that she was either too busy to notice he was watching her, or she was purposely ignoring him. For some reason, both of those ideas bothered him. He decided to test the waters.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," he said.

"Morning," she replied, sparing him a glance and a distracted half-smile.

Okay, so she wasn't ignoring him... That meant she was simply too engrossed in her reading to pay attention to him. She'd sort of smiled at him, but the usual warmth was gone. This was rather disconcerting. He didn't like being made to feel like he was a bother to someone, whether they meant to do it or not. It made him feel... little. He wanted her to go back to the way she always was. Usually she smiled at him, and he sometimes nodded, sometimes stared blankly, and sometimes sneered back at her but she never changed, no matter what he did. She was a constant.

What could she possibly be so interested in that was more important than easing his discomfort?

He couldn't keep a slightly unsettled tone out of his voice. "Miss Granger, perhaps you would enlighten me as to what you find so engrossing?"

"Hmmm?" she asked. "Oh, er... you wouldn't be interested," she muttered, then went back to whatever it was.

He scowled.

"Miss Granger," he barked, and she jumped, startled. This annoyed him even further. "I asked you a simple question. It is common courtesy to respond."

She glared back. "And it is common courtesy, *Professor*, not to interrupt someone when they are in the middle of something. For your information, I'm reading about a friend of mine who recently made a breakthrough in Chinese Arithmancy." She stared him down with a hard expression.

Severus was completely taken aback. He had seriously expected her to apologize for ignoring him, explain in detail what she was reading, and try to get him to talk with her about it. Instead, she had put him in his place with a few well-chosen words. He realized his mouth was hanging open and closed it promptly before clearing his throat and looking away.

"I told you that you wouldn't be interested," she said in a firm tone. "Now, if you don't mind..." She went back to her reading without another word or glance to Severus.

He was at a loss. He didn't know whether to be angry or impressed. Perhaps he was both.

He wondered how long this new attitude of hers would last.

Something startling struck Severus as he sat there. It was the thought that he might have just caught a glimpse of that elusive, extraordinary quality he'd been wondering about. It was an unsettling realization especially considering that it had come to the surface while she was telling him off. What did that mean?

He finished his coffee and left for breakfast deep in thought.

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The door closed, and Hermione burst out laughing, a self-satisfied smirk on her face. That couldn't have gone more perfectly, and she'd have been lying if she said she hadn't enjoyed telling him off. From here it was only a matter of keeping up the pretence of disinterest. She could tell he was already irritated by her new demeanor. This was perfect! There was no better way to get someone to notice you than to irritate him.

If she pulled this off and she knew she could Severus Snape wouldn't know what hit him!

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Several days later, Severus had all but forgotten about the upcoming Bachelor Auction. He would have considered this a good thing if it hadn't been for the new problem that was occupying his thoughts. Hermione Granger was still ignoring him. She hadn't said 'hello,' hadn't smiled at him... It was as though she'd forgotten he existed. She didn't even seem to notice him glaring at her all the time. Severus wanted to do... something. He wanted to make her *react*, but he didn't know how to go about it. She was a puzzle that he couldn't solve, and it was driving him crazy.

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Hermione, for her part, knew exactly what Severus was going through. She would have to have been blind not to notice. She thought it was a testament to her skills as a woman that she was able to keep up the pretence of indifference while under that glare of his.

Still, she knew that even as irritated as he was, she was going to have to prompt him into the next action. A little exercise in cause and effect, as it were. But what to do...

The answer came to her as she sat at the staff table and watched a group of students talking. She couldn't hear them, but their body language spoke louder than words ever could. There were three students: a girl and two boys. She watched as the one of the boys addressed the girl, obviously trying to get her attention, only to be ignored as she turned her attention to the other boy and began conversing with him animatedly. The first boy's obvious jealousy was plain to be seen by all.

This was it. She knew she wouldn't get anywhere blatantly trying to make Severus jealous by showing interest in another man it was too soon for that; she had to be subtle, go slowly. Severus was irritated by her lack of polite acknowledgement toward him, her unwillingness to instigate a conversation. Therefore, she thought, the way to incite him into action was to show polite interest in someone else, converse with someone else in front of him. Even though she knew it was too soon to try and make him jealous in a romantic way, instinct told her that this 'someone else' should be a male.

She pondered who was the most likely candidate to get on Severus' nerves. A wicked grin spread on her face as she glanced at the DADA teacher.

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The next morning at breakfast, Hermione's chance arrived. She sat reading the newspaper, with Severus on her right and an empty chair on her left. After a few minutes of reading and feeling Severus' eyes on her, Remus Lupin took the empty chair, and she seized her opportunity.

"Hello, Hermione," he said pleasantly as he sat down. "How are you this morning?"

She turned a bright smile to him and returned his greeting. "I'm fine, Remus. How have you been?"

He poured himself some juice. "I can't complain."

Hermione went back to her reading. After a moment, Remus spoke again. "Anything worth reading about today?"

"Yes, actually," she said, tilting the paper toward him. "Apparently they've upped security at Gringotts..." She launched into an involved explanation, which Remus was genuinely interested in.

Several minutes later, it was time to go prepare her classroom for the day. She and Remus ended their conversation, and she folded up her paper. Remus left, and she scooted out from the table and stood up. She pretended not to notice Severus' livid expression as she left to Great Hall. As soon as her back was to him, she smiled again and congratulated herself on a scene well played.

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Severus was furious. So, she'd talk to *Lupin*, but she wouldn't talk to *him*? She'd smile and laugh with the werewolf, but couldn't spare *him* a second glance? What was Severus, chopped liver?

*We'll see about this, Miss Granger.*

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"Miss Granger," Severus said to her, nodding once as he saw her in the corridor. *Nowhere to run to, Granger*, he thought with a smirk.

He was wrong. Hermione glanced at him, raised her eyebrows once, and walked away quickly before he could even think of something to stop her. Severus was left feeling sourer than before.

His next attempt, he thought, was bound to get results. He'd orchestrate it so that she would have no choice but to acknowledge him.

He felt awkward doing it, but he pushed the feeling aside as he knocked on the door of her quarters the next evening. He knew she was home; he'd seen her enter on her way back from dinner, and she hadn't left since.

He was right. She opened the door and looked at him in mild surprise. "Oh. Hello, Professor. Is there something I can help you with?"

Severus smirked tightly. "As a matter of fact, there *is*, Miss Granger. I'm working on developing a new elixir, and I could use your expertise in Arithmancy to advise me." It wasn't quite true; Hermione *did* know more about Arithmancy than he did as well she should since it was the subject she taught but Severus knew enough to get by. He knew enough that he didn't truly need her help, but he figured if there was anything that would tempt Hermione to drop her disinterested attitude, it was presenting her with an opportunity to share her knowledge, to be a part of creating something new and exciting.

Apparently, he was incorrect. He had expected Hermione's eyes to light up with excitement at his proposal, but no such thing happened. Instead, she looked distinctly... bored.

"Erm, that sounds... interesting, Professor." She didn't look like she believed anything of the sort. "When did you want my help?"

Severus gritted his teeth. "Any evening you're free this week would be fine, though the sooner the better, I would say."

"...Right. Well, I suppose I could check my schedule. I'm rather busy this week, Professor. Are you sure you need my help?"

"Quite."

"I see. All right, then... I'll look over my evenings and get back to you."

"Very well, Miss Granger. See that you do."

"If that's all, Professor, have a good evening." The door was promptly and softly closed in his face.

Severus was, once again, livid. She'd made it sound as if he was inconveniencing her for even asking! She was busy? Busy with *what*? She wasn't *busy*. She was purposely ignoring him he just knew it!

He stood there fuming for a moment before stalking off in a huff. Well, she had better get back to him in a timely manner, or he'd have a few words for her. In fact, he just might have a few words for her anyway!

Busy indeed.

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Hermione closed the door and smiled. Her plan was moving along swimmingly. Her work was paying off. Severus was doing exactly what she'd hoped for coming to her. She just had to keep this up a little longer, then ease off. She chuckled as she remembered the look on his face when she'd told him she would have to check her schedule... Dear God, this was priceless well worth the acting involved just to see his nostrils flair in indignity like that.

The truth was, of course, that she had plenty of time. She could have followed him back to his lab at that moment, but where would be the fun in that? No, she had to keep him on his toes.

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The next morning, Severus watched as Hermione entered the Great Hall and took her seat beside him. He scowled when she made no move to speak to him.

"Miss Granger," he said tersely.

"Oh, hello, Professor. Was there something you needed?" She looked politely curious, and it made Severus' blood boil.

"You know perfectly well that there is," he spat.

She looked at him blankly, and he narrowed his eyes. "The potion, Miss Granger, your help?"

"Oh, that."

"Yes, *that*." He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from saying something that would send him backpedaling.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I was going to tell you about that. It just slipped my mind."

"How convenient," he said acidly.

She looked at him strangely, as if wondering what on earth could have caused his harsh tone. "I checked my schedule, and you'll be happy to know that I can help you on Saturday evening."

"That's in six days," he said, glaring.

"Yes, so?"

"I'm just supposed to put my work on hold until then?"

"Well, you did say I could help you any time over the next week. I'm sorry, Professor. That's the earliest I can do it."

Severus didn't believe that for one second, but he decided to count this as a win. She had agreed after all. "Fine. I'll expect you in my lab at seven sharp on Saturday. And, Miss Granger, do be punctual. I haven't all the time in the world."

"Of course, Professor. I'll be there. I really am sorry for making you wait so long." Her voice was apologetic, but Severus didn't buy it. Still, he wasn't going to make an issue of it now that she had conceded. He finally had a chance to spend a whole evening trying to crack her façade. He grumbled something acquiescent and went back to his breakfast.

Now he just had to figure out what potion he would be 'needing her help with.'

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**More Notes From SB:** Thanks go to Southern\_Witch\_69 for betaing and for listening to me rant about this story. A round of applause for SW!

And a review wouldn't offend me. :)

## Project and Passion

Chapter 2 of 6

Severus needs Hermione's "help" on a project, and he decides to cut her in on the profits. What happens when a simple dinner meeting to discuss business turns into *more*?...

Thanks go to Southern\_Witch\_69 for her fabulous beta-ing!

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## Project and Passion

Saturday arrived, and Hermione was on time, just as she'd promised to be. She knocked on the door of Severus' lab just before seven. He opened it promptly and retreated back to the potion he was working on without a word, signaling Hermione should follow. She closed the door to the lab and moved to where he was standing. She peered down into the cauldron, genuinely curious but not wanting to appear too keen.

She watched as Severus added one more ingredient, then put a stasis spell on the project and turned to her.

"Miss Granger, I'm working on a variation of the Babbling Beverage."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise, obviously wondering why he would be spending time playing around with such a trivial potion and wondering what he would possibly need her help for. Before she could ask either question, Severus raised a finger to silence her.

"It sounds trifling, but what I'm actually doing is trying to turn it into a translation potion. It's more of a reversal than a variation, really. Before you tell me that there is no need for such a potion, as a Translation Spell is simple enough to perform, I should tell you that I realize this and that I am of the belief that the more options one has available to solve a problem, the better off one will be."

"That's actually very clever, Professor, and I wasn't going to say anything of the sort. In fact, I agree with you. There are many unknowns when working with spells plus, one might not even have a wand available for casting. A potion could be carried as an alternative say... for someone going on a trip to a foreign country. There are many reasons such a person could use an alternative."

Severus nodded, impressed that she agreed with his logic. He had actually spent the better part of the last six days trying to think of a legitimate project that her opinion could actually help with. He'd gone through his copy of Glossarium Medicamentum, starting with A and moving forward, looking for something that he could change or expound upon. He only got as far as B before he came across the Babbling Beverage, and the idea struck him to think about a translation potion. After that, it wasn't long before he became genuinely interested in the project. He'd found himself glad of the extra time before this evening, as it had given him more room to work. By that morning, he was actually looking forward to Hermione's visit and not entirely for the reason he'd originally planned for (trying to figure out her game). He truly wanted to share the progress he'd made with someone, with Hermione.

"May I ask," she said, "whether this is intended to be consumed by the person who wants to understand or the person who needs to be understood?" She didn't wait for an answer. "It seems like it would be more complicated to make it for the use of the person who wants to understand, but it would be more useful that way, that person could understand more than one person who needed translating, instead of having to give the potion to each person whose language was unrecognized. Though, as I said, I would think it would be more complicated that way. Would you have to design the potion to include specific languages?"

Severus waited for her to stop speaking before answering her, and then they were off.

Hermione had intended to maintain her act, but she was truly interested. She couldn't help it. Once they'd started working, bouncing ideas off one another, Hermione had forgotten to act standoffish, and Severus had forgotten to try to provoke her. By the time they were through and had completed the project successfully together, both were far more interested in naming the potion in question. They'd debated between Converting Concoction and Deciphering Draught. Hermione had insisted on using alliteration. Severus had bitten his lip to keep from smiling at that.

"Well, Miss Granger"

"Professor Granger," she said quickly, "or Hermione."

"What?"

"I'm a teacher at this school. I'd really prefer it if you stopped referring to me as Miss Granger. I'm not your student anymore." Her tone wasn't angry, just firm.

Severus debated internally for a moment. Finally, he decided that he'd call her whatever she wanted if it would help defrost her icy attitude. "Professor then," he said with a nod.

She nodded back and gave a small smile, and then she remembered her plan. It wouldn't do to stay around chatting. She glanced at the clock and said, "Well, I must say I enjoyed working with you. Thank you for asking me. It's getting late, though. I should be going. Thank you again, Professor. I hope you found my assistance useful."

And she was gone. Severus sat down on a stool and stared ahead, deep in thought. He had found her company not only useful, but also enjoyable so much so that he had forgotten to keep up his plan to pick her apart. He hadn't needed to.

He admitted to himself that he wouldn't be averse to spending more time in her company. He thought it might be worth it and not just to trick her into going back to the way she'd been, though that would be nice. He appreciated that she was holding her own against him it proved she had strength but he didn't appreciate how distant she was with him. Couldn't there be a middle ground? Couldn't she be the warm, friendly constant he hadn't realized she'd been before that morning in the staff room and still keep her newfound strength?

Somewhere in the course of the evening, he had gone from wanting to prove that he could crack her to genuinely wanting to get to know her. He also realized that if he wanted to get to know her, he would have to rethink his attitude as well. It wasn't in his nature to be a friendly person, but he knew that if he was honest with himself, he couldn't expect her to show him warmth and interest if he showed her none.

An idea came to him.

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The following morning, Hermione opened a note that had been slid under her door.

*Professor Granger,*

*I would like to thank you for your assistance last night. I found your opinion to be valuable and your company enjoyable. I would not have been able to finish so quickly or ended up with such a viable potion without you. Naturally, if our potion is to be marketed, you should have a say in it, as well as a portion of any residuals. I would like to discuss these things with you soon. If you are willing and available, I can make reservations for a dinner meeting this week. Please let me know if this is acceptable and when you are available at your earliest convenience.*

*Regards,*

*Professor Severus Snape*

*Potions master*

Hermione's jaw dropped. She read the letter again just to make sure she hadn't imagined the whole thing. Did he really want to market the potion? And give her credit?

That would be amazing in and of itself, aside from how pleasant the note had been. It seemed that her plan was working. She decided that dinner with Snape would fit into her tactics quite nicely. If she wanted him to get to know her as a woman, she would have to give him the opportunity. She would just have to be careful not to give away too much.

*Professor Snape,*

*Thank you for considering my assistance in developing the Deciphering Draught of enough note to give me credit in its making. I must say I'm surprised you think so since the idea and most of the work belongs to you, but your thoughtfulness is nonetheless welcome.*

*I'm available Tuesday, Friday, or Saturday of this week for dinner. Let me know which is most convenient for you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione Granger*

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Severus read her response and smirked. *Not so strapped for time now, are we, Miss Granger?* No matter. This worked out for the better anyway, and it meant she was through treating him like a disease she didn't want to catch... he hoped.

He wrote back, telling her that he would make reservations for Tuesday evening, telling her the sooner they worked out the details of their potion, the better, and that she should be ready to leave the castle and dressed semi-formally by a quarter to seven.

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Hermione succeeded in keeping a safe but reasonable distance from Severus until Tuesday evening. He knocked on her door promptly at a quarter 'til, and she opened it without delay, suppressing a gasp. She hadn't seen him dressed in anything but plain, black, formal teaching robes for a long time. Even had she not already held certain romantic feelings for him, she would have had to admit that he looked quite dashing in his dress robes. Still black, and still fairly traditional, but the cut left less room for billowing, and the white fabric visible around the neck and the velvet black of the vest suited him, made him look elegant. His hair was clean and was pulled back loosely. Hermione thought that look suited him, too.

In her intense study of him, she had missed the same look of awe momentarily reflected in his own eyes. She finally smiled at him and broke the silence. "Hello, Professor. You look very nice."

"As do you, Miss Granger. Shall we?"

He offered her his arm, and with the distracting flutter in her stomach that accompanied the action, she forgot to correct him for calling her Miss Granger.

abababababab

Severus was glad, as they arrived at Carmichael's in Diagon Alley, that they were early. The wait line, for those who hadn't made reservations, was surprisingly long for a weeknight, and he didn't want to risk having their table given away.

"Oh, I've never been here before," Hermione said, still resting her hand lightly in the crook of his arm.

"It hasn't been here long, only a year or so. It's family owned. The food is quite good and the atmosphere pleasant. I thought it would be an acceptable place to discuss our project," Severus said as he led her to the hostess.

"Did you have a reservation for this evening, sir?" she asked politely, hunched in a slightly unprofessional way over her reservation book.

Hermione smiled. It was obvious the woman was feeling flustered, probably not used to this kind of crowd on a night like this.

"Yes," replied Severus, "for two, under the name of Snape."

"Uh-huh..." the hostess muttered, dragging her finger down the page. "Right. Here you are. Please follow John, and he'll show you to your table."

They followed the bellboy to a table in the back of the restaurant, and Severus held out a chair for Hermione before settling into the other.

The bellboy, John, handed them each a menu and told them their waitress would be with them shortly to take their order.

Hermione thanked him and turned a light smile to Severus. "This is a lovely place. I'm glad you chose it." She began to peruse the menu in front of her, and Severus took that opportunity to peruse her.

He held up the laminated list and tilted his head down, watching her with his eyes, the rest of his face concealed. When she'd opened her door earlier, he'd only allowed himself a moment to appreciate how lovely she looked, not wanting to be caught gazing at her like a fish. Now, he was free to gape all he wanted since she couldn't see his mouth hidden safely behind his menu.

He'd never seen Hermione Granger look so... adult, so sophisticated. There was nothing particularly fancy about her dress robes they were blue and understatedly cut. The neckline dropped low enough to show the delicate outline of collarbone and a hint of the swell of her breasts, but not low enough to be considered daring or tasteless. As he looked at her, he couldn't put his finger on what it was that made her look so stunning. Yes, she looked lovely with her hair flowing around her in wild curls, and her eyes stood out beautifully when she looked directly at him, but it was something else that was causing him to neglect his hunger. It was that he was seeing her as a woman for the first time.

She always wore traditional, shapeless teaching robes around the castle with her hair pulled back from her face. Her robes were certainly not shapeless now, and wearing her hair down made her look softer, more feminine. Severus had to admit that he liked what he saw.

He turned his attention to the menu, knowing that he'd have to be ready to order soon.

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Hermione bit her lip as she deliberated between the salmon and the chicken parmesan. She hadn't been out to eat in quite a while, and she wanted to choose something she would enjoy. She decided on the salmon just before their waitress, a pleasant looking young woman named Allison, arrived and asked them if they were ready to order.

Hermione nodded and told her the choice she'd made, and Severus quietly and in as few words as possible ordered a steak, medium rare. He also asked for a bottle of red wine.

Allison nodded and walked away swiftly, leaving Hermione and Severus with no menu to peruse, and therefore, no excuse to be silent. Hermione figured it was Severus' turn to break the ice. He was the one who had requested this meeting in the first place, though she realized this definitely had more of a 'date' feel than a meeting should. That idea didn't bother her in the least.

After a few moments of what could have been awkward silence if Hermione had chosen to take it that way, Severus spoke.

"I want to thank you again for your assistance. It was appreciated. I enjoyed having someone to discuss my ideas with. I... rarely share my work with anyone."

"I noticed," she said with a friendly smile.

"Yes, well, I am rarely in the company of anyone I consider capable enough to give a valid opinion on my work."

"Then I'm flattered you consider me to be such, Professor," she said.

For some reason, his title sounded odd to Severus in this setting, and he was trying to get her to be friendlier with him after all.

"Severus," he said, making a decision. "I think it would be appropriate for you call me by my given name under the circumstances, as we are about to become business partners.

"Severus it is then," she said. "I suppose I can't have you calling me Professor Granger while we're dressed like this, can I?"

Severus smiled wryly, and Hermione thought it changed his features in a most pleasant way. "You should smile more often," she commented, then immediately regretted it when the smile disappeared.

"Well, Hermione," he stressed her name a bit, giving her a pointed look, "as I'm sure you can imagine, I don't often have cause to smile."

"Perhaps there is something we can do about that," she said simply.

He gave her a measuring look, wondering what she meant by that. Was she saying she would be the one to make him smile? That was an interesting thought and not as ridiculous as it once might have been.

"Perhaps," he said, inclining his head.

The wine arrived, and Severus offered some to Hermione. She held out her glass, and he filled it before filling his own.

"So," she said, "were you serious about marketing the Deciphering Draught?"

"Of course I was serious," he said a little sharply, frowning. "I wouldn't have suggested it to you if I didn't intend on doing it."

Hermione nodded. "And how would we go about making it available to the public? Have you ever sold any of your previous work?"

"Yes," he replied, "several times. It's simple enough to accomplish. Once it's ready for the public, I'll contact a solicitor, have it patented in our names, and he'll take care of the rest. There's a bit more to it than that, but those are the basics."

"When will it be ready for the public?" she asked. "Wait," she said, looking at him suspiciously. "Isn't patenting a product rather expensive? Where are we going to get the money for the patent?"

"It will be ready for the public once it's been successfully tested on humans, and we will not be getting the money from anywhere. It was *my* original idea, and as you said in your response to my dinner invitation, *I* did most of the work, so *I* will be paying for the patent."

"Severus," she said, frowning, "if you intend on including me in this and giving me a portion of the profit, I must insist on paying for some the patent, at least proportionate to how much I'm going to get of the residuals. Otherwise, I'm getting something for nothing. That wouldn't be fair to you."

He glared at her. "Miss Granger, let me explain this to you. You are quite right in thinking that the patent is expensive, and on the salary I know you earn, there is no way you could pay for half of the patent."

"Half?" she said, startled. "What do you mean 'half'?"

"You said you'd insist on paying proportionate to your share of the profit. That would be half. Am I missing something here?"

She gasped. "You can't give me half! I didn't do half of the work!"

"That doesn't matter," he said firmly. "You did enough that it wouldn't have been finished without you, and you named it. That makes half of it yours." He wasn't about to tell her that he wouldn't even have thought of the project in the first place if he hadn't needed a legitimate excuse to invite her over.

Hermione pursed her lips. "And I suppose you have enough that paying for my half of the patent and giving me more than my share won't put a dent in your finances?"

Severus arched an eyebrow. "As I said before, this is not the first of my work that I've sold."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest again, but Severus held up his hand to silence her. "Look at it this way. I know how much you earn in a year, as it's what I earned when I began teaching; therefore, I can tell you that you wouldn't be able to comfortably pay for even a smaller portion of the patent."

"How do you know I don't have an inheritance stashed away somewhere?"

Severus arched an eyebrow again, smirking this time. "Last I knew, both your parents were still alive, Hermione."

They stared at each other, Hermione with her arms folded stubbornly and Severus with a smug smirk still playing around his mouth, until Hermione finally conceded, sighing.

"Fine," she said, "but I insist on paying you back for my half once I have the means to do so."

"Agreed," he said, thinking if it got her to stop protesting, he'd allow her to think he'd let her reimburse him. "Then it's settled. The next thing we need to do is set up a test. It should be simple enough. We'll just find someone who speaks a foreign language and pay them for their time."

She nodded, and their dinner arrived.

The business part of their dinner taken care of, they soon found other things to discuss, and Severus' feeling that Hermione was good company was reaffirmed. She conversed with ease, but was not the type to speak only to hear the sound of her own voice.

Hermione, for her part, was surprised at how pleasant Severus was being. She'd never before heard him talk about anything other than potions or battle tactics for longer than a few minutes, really, and she was pleased to find that she felt comfortable with him.

Everything went smoothly until the meal was over and they were both pleasantly full. The wine had been working on Hermione, or she probably wouldn't have dared ask. But she was feeling good, and they'd been having a nice time, so when the band started playing a slow, jazzy little number, she glanced at the Potions master and decided to go for it.

With a smile and a tilt of her head toward the source of the music, she said, "Would you like to dance, Severus?"



He froze. He glanced at the dance floor, which was slowly filling up with tightly embracing couples, and said, "Ah, no. I think not."

"Oh," she said, stung, immediately regretting asking. Everything had been going so well. Why wouldn't he want to dance with her? Had she done something wrong, or had she simply tilted her hand too early and given herself away? That had to be it. She berated herself for forgetting her plan. Of course he wouldn't want to dance with her. This was supposed to be a business meeting, and just because she'd had some wine, she'd forgotten that he didn't see her that way, as someone he could dance with. She wanted him to, but she realized that by making the first move, she'd messed things up.

She felt foolish, embarrassed, and more than a little hurt, but she knew it was her own fault. That was what she got for putting her own feelings on the line like that for someone who didn't return them. She felt her throat tighten, a warning to something more embarrassing. Maybe this whole thing had been a bad idea. She'd wanted Severus to notice that she was ignoring him; he had. She'd wanted him to make the first move in getting to know her; he had. But she'd been foolish to think her feelings for him would ever have a chance at being returned. He would never see her as anything more than a colleague, and even that was more than she should have expected. Maybe it was time to give this whole thing up.

She cleared her throat, looking anywhere but Severus. She had to get out of here... before she did something even more foolish or, worse, cried in front of him. Quickly, but as smoothly as she could, she pushed her chair away from the table and stood. Still not looking at him, she said, "Well, it is getting late, and we both have classes to teach in the morning. I think it's time for me to go."

"Hermione," Severus said as he got to his feet. He had watched the emotions play out on her face, and while he was confused at her reaction, he knew enough to realize he'd hurt her by his refusal to dance.

She ignored him, continuing on in a rushed way instead. "Thank you for dinner. I had a nice time. Uh, let me know what you decide about testing."

"Hermione"

"I'll see you... around." She turned to leave, but Severus caught her arm.

She looked at him, surprised, but quickly looked away, wanting nothing more than to put some distance between them and not understanding why he wasn't letting her.

He held on to her wrist tightly, though not enough to hurt her, and tried to fix the situation. "... I haven't danced since I was forced to learn for the Yule Ball when I was fourteen. I'd rather you didn't leave thinking I turned you down because I didn't want to dance with you." She looked at him again, surprised, and he gave another wry smile, the second of the evening. "I'm afraid I simply don't know how."

"You you haven't danced in all this time?" she asked, and he shook his head. "Never at a party... or on a date?"

"Ah, no." He decided not to mention that he would have had to *go* on a date to *dance* on one.

"Oh," Hermione said, feeling her urge to cry disappear. Maybe she had been little hasty in assuming her plan was destined for failure. She blamed it on the wine. She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, then decided to try again. She gave him a hesitant, sideways sort of look and pushed her luck. "Would you... like to give it a try?"

Severus looked at her big, brown eyes, sparkling so unsurely and thought, not for the first time that evening, that she looked enchanting. He decided he *would* like to give it a try. It would be nice to see what she felt like pressed up against him, and how bad a dancer could he be? He looked at the other couples on the floor; there didn't seem to be much to it just a lot of swaying and turning. He could handle that. He nodded at Hermione, and she let out a quiet breath, smiling at him warmly. He moved to join her and slipped his hand down her wrist so that her hand was in his.

They walked to the dance floor, Hermione feeling almost lightheaded at the way his fingers wove through hers, Severus feeling a bit nervous.

They found a place and turned to each other. "How... where?" he began, not sure of what to do from here.

"Just keep holding my hand like you are, and put your other around my waist."

"Like this?" he asked, sliding his arm around her.

"Yes." She put her free hand on his shoulder and moved in a little closer.

Another song started, and Severus instinctively began to lead her in a small, slow circle, turning them in place.

"That's all there is to it," she said, smiling up at him.

Severus looked back at her, enjoying her closeness, just as he'd thought he would. It wasn't nearly as awkward as he'd feared, and he decided there was something to this dancing thing. After a few minutes, he relaxed completely, feeling like he had the hang of it. He looked around and saw that most other couples were holding each other more closely. It looked like it would be nice. He gently pulled her closer until her body was flush against him, and her face settled against his neck. He felt her sigh as she molded her body to his, and a thrill rushed through him.

He was suddenly very aware of every part of his body. His skin tingled, and his breathing became a little shaky. He nestled his face lightly into her hair and inhaled the herbal, flowery scent of her shampoo. He closed his eyes, thinking he'd never felt anything like this. Even the sex he'd experienced hadn't been as intimate or as thrilling as this. He wanted to be even closer to her, wanted to explore this new world of contact.

All too soon, the music stopped, but Severus didn't want to let go of Hermione. She didn't seem to be making a move to untangle herself from him either. She shifted her head and looked up at him, communicating in a single glance that she didn't want to let go any more than he did.

What he did next, he'd never be able to explain where he got the courage to do. He dipped his head slowly, giving her time to move away. But she didn't move away. Her eyes fluttered closed just as his lips reached hers, and his eyes closed too, leaving all his nerves, his whole body, to focus on the feeling of Hermione's soft lips against his.

He tightened his fingers around her hand and pulled her even closer. He felt her bury her hand in his hair and moved his lips against hers. He brushed his bottom lip back and forth lightly across hers, then gently sucked it into his mouth and ran the tip of his tongue over it, tasting it. She opened her mouth, and he felt her sigh again, exhaling into his mouth. Her tongue slid past his teeth, and he felt another thrill run through his entire body. He relaxed even more into the kiss and was soon sucking gently on the tip of her tongue. She moaned and he sucked harder.

After a moment, she wrapped her tongue around his and pulled it into her mouth, entreating him to follow. He was happy to do so and was soon exploring her mouth thoroughly, glorying in her soft moans and wondering why in hell he hadn't done this months ago. This incredible, intoxicating feeling... She tasted so good to him, and it felt like she'd been made for him to kiss. He wasn't exactly sure what had brought him to this point, but at the moment, he couldn't have cared less.

All that mattered was that she was kissing him as hungrily as he was kissing her, holding him as tightly. It was overwhelming, and soon he was out of breath. He didn't want to stop, but passing out from lack of oxygen would be worse. Panting slightly, he broke away from her mouth and rested his forehead against hers. Where had that come from? Had this feeling been waiting for him for all this time, and he'd just been too blind to notice?

"Severus," Hermione almost moaned, and his eyes snapped open to find her looking at him in awe, reflecting the hunger he felt.

He looked at her lips again, then back into her eyes. She pressed another kiss to his lips, and before he could demand more, she pulled away and untangled herself from him. He felt the loss of contact sharply, and his intoxicated brain wondered why its drug of choice had suddenly been ripped away.

She pulled him off the dance floor and back to their table, and he followed her, feeling bowled over. By the time they reached the table, he at least had enough of his brain function back to help Hermione into her cloak and to pay the check.

He grabbed her hand again and led her out of the restaurant, just this side of running. The moment they were in the clear, he pulled her against him and Disapparated, reappearing moments later in front of the gates to Hogwarts. He wasted no time in devouring her mouth again, this time burying one hand in her hair and flattening the other against the small of her back.

It was quite cold, but he didn't feel it. All he could think of was continuing to kiss Hermione to never stop kissing Hermione. Gods, why had he never kissed Hermione before? He was like a kid who had just discovered candy for the first time after being restricted to a lifelong diet of cardboard and cooked spinach. He couldn't get enough.

Hermione was in heaven. Gods, could this man kiss. This was more than anything she'd ever imagined, even with him. She felt like her nerves were on fire, her heart was pounding in her chest, and Severus was swallowing her whole. Who knew this man had so much passion? He was devouring her like a starving man, and she could only hold on for dear life and hope she came out of this in one piece.

An unmeasured amount of time later, they came up for air, both gasping, looking at each other in a mixture of wonder and desire.

"Oh, my God..." she said, trying to catch her breath.

Severus quite agreed.

"That was..."

Severus nodded, swallowing thickly. "Yes, it was."

"We should"

"Yes, we should," he said, capturing her mouth again.

"Mmph. We should..." she murmured between kisses, "get inside."

"Uh-huh," he muttered, making no move to do so.

"Cold," she went on.

"Uh-huh..."

"And late."

"Yes," he said, but only went on kissing her.

"Severus," she said. "Mmph, Severus."

"What?"

"I think we should call it a night."

Severus brain wasn't quite up to its usually processing power. "What?"

"We should get some sleep."

Sleep. Bed. Good idea.

He opened the gates and pulled her through them, practically dragging her towards the castle. She giggled, and when they reached the doors, he pulled her inside and went for her mouth again. She just kept giggling, glad it was way past student curfew since Severus was clearly unconcerned with being caught.

They made their way slowly toward Hermione's quarters, and when they finally arrived, Hermione was pushed unceremoniously against her door and attacked with renewed fervor. Great Merlin, the man was insatiable...

Hermione knew she was going to have to put a stop to this, make a decision for both of them since Severus' reasoning abilities were currently on holiday. She pulled away, panting and smiling, and Severus tried to follow her lips. She tilted her head away from him, but he was undeterred and went for her neck instead.

Merlin, that felt good... *Right. Focus, Hermione.*

"Good night, Severus."

Severus, who was doing a damn good job of giving Hermione a respectable hickey, heard her bid him good night, but didn't really register it until she had opened her door and pulled away from him completely, leaving his mouth with nothing to suck on and his brain to attempt to function without the blood it needed, which was currently occupying his raging cock.

*Oh, God...*

He stared at her, unable to form words, trying to think clearly but unable to get past how deliciously disheveled she looked and how much he wanted to devour her again.

"I think we both need to get to bed..."

He couldn't have agreed more. He made a move towards her again, but she shook her head, grinning amusedly.

"Separately, Severus. We both have early classes tomorrow."

*Right. That.*

His rational brain, what was left of it anyway, knew she was right, but his cock had other ideas. "Hermione," he managed. "I'll be honest. I doubt I'm going to get much sleep like this." He glanced down at his tented robes pointedly, then back at her.

Hermione smothered a laugh, biting her lip to keep for chuckling. "That does look... er, uncomfortable."

"You have no idea."

"Yes, well, I'm going to get some sleep and, er, leave you to it." She glanced at his erection as she said this, and he groaned. She thought about giving him a final kiss, but decided it would be a bit cruel, considering she had no intention of seeing it through to its logical conclusion... tonight. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Severus." With that, she closed the door softly, and he was left to grit his teeth.

Merlin, what did she mean by it? He couldn't remember ever being this hard. He was going to be lucky to make it back to his quarters in this condition, let alone get any sleep. He pulled his robes around him and almost limped all the way back to the dungeons, cursing every time a step he took made his cock throb harder.

He made it back only by thinking of Hermione's soft body against his, her sweet little mouth sucking on his tongue. He imagined what it would feel like on his cock and how much he wanted to strip her down and fuck her until they both saw stars. By the time he made it to his rooms and closed the door behind him, he was nearly insensate.

He pulled his robes off as quickly as he could and freed his aching penis from his shorts, wasting no time with light caresses. He slumped into his plush, leather sofa and began working his cock firmly. He massaged the head with the palm of one hand and worked the shaft with the other, imagining it was Hermione touching him.

He pictured her kneeling before him, kissing and sucking his penis, making those little moaning noises around his cock that had driven him wild. He groaned hard as his hands sped up, completely beyond reason now. McGonagall herself could have burst through the door, and he would have gone on stroking. He was in male mode, a creature completely taken over by lust.

He was muttering now, his eyes shut tightly, picturing the beautiful body she had to have hidden under her robes to push himself further. Gods in heaven, he'd never felt anything this good... Every image, every remembered taste and sound, every imagined part of her body sent him higher, fed his pleasure and built him up like a bonfire until he was ready to explode. He pictured her lying naked on his floor, splayed out in all her glory. In his mind he caught a glimpse of her wet, pink center as she spread her legs, and it was all over for him.

He let out a roar as he erupted with the force of a geyser, shouting, "Good fucking God!*Hermione!*" And still he came, moaning in time with the pulses of his cock until it was empty and he was left shaking.

Completely drained, he was asleep before he could even think to clean himself up and get to his bed.

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As Severus was making his way back to the dungeons, Hermione was leaning against her door, grinning like a goon. She began to laugh, happier than she could have imagined. It turned out there was a chance he could return her feelings after all. And gods, being held by him, being kissed by him... she'd never felt anything more overwhelmingly wonderful.

She flung herself back onto her bed, still in her robes, giggling as she remembered the pained look on his face when he'd not so subtly pointed out his arousal, as if she could have missed it pressed against her stomach...

The fact that she'd been in a situation with Severus Snape where she could think about his arousal was simply amazing.

She was just glad that she'd asked him to dance a second time.

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**SB's Notes:** That was some snog, eh? I had a lot of fun writing that whole chapter. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Heh. If that's even possible. :-D

*Glossarium Medicamentum* -- Potions Glossary

While inventing that potion, I did what Severus said he did. I went over to the Lexicon and started alphabetically until I came to the B's and found that.

## Misunderstanding and Maturity

*Chapter 3 of 6*

Severus and Hermione have their first misunderstanding, take their first steps toward getting to know one another, and make some plans.

*Disclaimer: I am not J.K. Rowling and am not making any money from this fic. There a straightforward disclaimer.*

Thanks go to Southern\_Witch\_69 for her patience, encouragement, guidance, beta reading, and friendship.

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### Misunderstanding and Maturity

Severus woke up on his sofa the next morning in dire need of a shower and a fresh set of robes. The first thing he thought of, after wondering briefly why he was on his couch, of course, was Hermione. In the light of day, the all-consuming passion had gone, but the feeling of rightness he'd had as he'd held her and kissed her, of completion... remained strongly.

It was a bit frightening, if he was honest with himself. More than a bit actually, but not so much that he wanted these feelings to go away. They were strong, new, and, therefore, risky to pursue, but Severus had gone on long enough in the same routine. This could be a chance to find out what he'd been missing if he dared, and he certainly wanted to.

He thought again back to the night before and how quickly it had gone from nervous and friendly to heated and hungry, how that first kiss had left him reeling. He'd become another man last night. He'd never lost control like that before in his life. He'd never lost his ability to reason, never once lost himself in the way Hermione's kiss kisses had taken him over. It was unnerving but also exhilarating, in a way.

He wondered if there really could be more to this. He wondered if Hermione would give them the chance to find out. Would he? Yes, he would. He wanted to feel that way again. He just hoped that Hermione was through with distancing herself from him.

Severus sighed, knowing already that he was in over his head. He had no idea how to go about a romantic relationship with a woman assuming, of course, that the woman in question was open to being romanced.

As he showered and dressed for the day, his mind barely on his routine, he came to the conclusion that he would have to find out where Hermione stood before he could even let himself think of anything further happening. It was all well and good for him to think about how much he'd like to explore these newfound possibilities, but what if

she had woken up this morning and had come to her senses? What if she thought it had been a mistake? She *had* been the one to put a stop to it... He shook his head, reminding his brain not to get ahead of itself.

He needed to talk to Hermione... but what to say?

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Hermione, meanwhile, was having many of the same thoughts as Severus feeling elated and excited about what had happened, but afraid he would think it was a mistake, that he would tell her in no uncertain terms that he'd lost his senses with a willing woman in his arms and would not have done any of it if it hadn't been for the wine.

She made her way through her quarters as she prepared for the day, going back and forth in her mind, her stomach fluttering in a combination of nerves and happiness.

She realized as she closed her door and warded it behind her that she was only one half of this equation; she was just going to have to take the day as it came.

Minutes later, she took a deep breath and pushed open a door to the Great Hall, her eyes instinctively looking to see if Severus was already there; he wasn't. Unsure of what that meant, or if it meant anything at all, she made her way up to the staff table and took her seat, too nervous to be very interested in a real breakfast.

"Hi, Hermione," Remus Lupin said, drawing her out of her thoughts. He could tell there was something on her mind anyone with eyes could tell there was something on her mind. "Are you feeling all right this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. How are you? I haven't seen you since the full moon. How did it go?"

"Well enough," he said, shrugging. "Wolfsbane Potion's the same as it's always been. Anything new with you?"

They fell into a light conversation that put Hermione at ease simply because it gave her something to do other than wonder about Severus.

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Severus entered the Hall shortly after Hermione and made his way up to the head of the room, glaring suitably into the occasional wandering eye that met his. He glanced at the staff table and noted with a slightly uncomfortable jolt in his stomach that Hermione was already there.

He swallowed hard. Even after all the thinking he'd done on the matter, he still had no idea what he was going to say to her. If it turned out that she was upset, angry, or uncomfortable with what had happened, how would he explain his behavior to her? What could he say to excuse the way he'd practically mauled her?

As he got closer to the table, he noticed that Hermione's back was turned to his usual chair and that she was already making conversation with Lupin. He scowled, unsure of how to react. Did that mean she was going back to treating him with indifference, even after last night? Was she just going to pretend it hadn't happened? Well, if that was the case, he was hardly going to open the door for her to snub him.

He steeled himself as he sat down, thinking that if she was going to go on ignoring him, she wasn't worth the bother. The least she could do was turn around and face him. She had to know he was there; he'd been making the usual amount of noise typical of sliding a chair back from a table and sitting down.

He looked again at her turned back and clenched his jaw, feeling spurned and foolish for getting ahead of himself. Enough was enough. If she wanted to continue her game, she could continue on her own. He wanted no part in it.

Hermione had no idea that Severus had not only arrived but was also sitting behind her doing a truly impressive job of letting his bitterness and doubt replace the good they'd achieved over the last week. She'd been so glad of the momentary excuse to get her mind off her nerves that she'd completely tuned everything else out but her conversation with Remus.

It was, therefore, a surprise to her when they finished speaking and she turned around to find Severus staring fixedly ahead, eating his breakfast at an unhurried pace. She looked at him, again feeling the fluttering sensation in her stomach that was quickly becoming familiar.

She didn't know what to say, so she tried to catch his eye, hoping it would lead naturally to a conversation, but he didn't seem to notice.

She suddenly felt very unsure of herself. Why hadn't he said something to her when he'd arrived? Was it as she'd feared that he thought it was a mistake? More uncertainty flooded through her. Had last night meant anything at all? Was he angry with her for it?

"Severus?" she said hesitantly and felt something stab through her heart when he turned a cutting glare on her. The look in his eyes as he stared at her was one of pure resentment. This was her worst fear coming true. She'd finally had a taste of what his arms felt like around her, and he was wishing it had never happened. She had thought, hoped, that he'd want to keep moving forward, but... she felt her heart break as the last of her hopes threatened to die.

Still, she needed to hear it from him. She needed him to tell her that it had been a mistake. "Whatwhat's wrong?" she asked, swallowing a thick lump in her throat and dreading the answer.

"Don't bother with the act, Miss Granger," he sneered back. "You know perfectly well what's wrong, and I want nothing to do with your games."

So that was it. He'd realized what she'd been up to, and now he wanted nothing to do with her. She should have known that trying to maneuver the situation would come back to bite her in the arse. But she'd really thought she had seen something in his eyes the night before other than lust. Why was he just dismissing it all?

"So, that's it?" she said, choking back tears as he turned away from her. "Just like that?"

"Just like what?" he scoffed into his coffee.

"After everything... and last night." She couldn't keep the tears from spilling now. "The way you held me?" She worked hard to keep her voice steady and failed.

Severus' eyes snapped to hers when he heard the break in her voice. He watched the tears running down her cheeks and realized he'd made a terrible mistake. He cursed himself for being so hasty in assuming she was choosing to ignore him. He'd thought she was reverting back to indifference and had acted defensively, and now she thought he was rejecting her, that she meant nothing to him. He wasn't sure he could pinpoint what exactly she meant to him, but it certainly wasn't nothing.

She wore her heart in her eyes, and he could see what his callous words had done to her. He needed to fix this, but he didn't know what to say.

Hermione stood up quickly, thinking she'd already made enough of a scene as it was and that she'd rather not stick around and have her heart squashed even more. Moving as swiftly as she could with her head tilted down to hide her tears, she left the Great Hall and just kept walking, turning several random corners and finally breaking into a run only to have her arm caught by Severus.

"Hermione, wait. I didn't let me"

She yanked her arm free and said, "Tell me something. Was it only lust to you?" Her voice was just loud enough for him to hear.

"Hermione..."

"I was just... a warm body." She closed her eyes.

"No, I"

Her voice turned decidedly bitter as she went on, but she couldn't help it. Her disappointment was overwhelming. "Not that I blame you," she said with a humorless laugh. "Here's little Hermione with a crush on her ex-professor. You'd have been a fool not to take what I was offering."

"What? No!" he said hastily. "Hermione, no. Why would you think that?"

She looked at him incredulously. "You said it yourself. You figured out the game I've been playing with you. Surely you must have realized I was doing it because I wanted you to notice me."

Severus was speechless. That thought had never crossed his mind. He'd figured she'd just wanted to throw him off, see him vexed about something. "I had no idea."

She gave him another look that plainly told him she thought he was full of shite.

"Truly, I... I had no idea you felt that way about me."

"Right," she snorted. "As if there could have been any doubt in your mind after last night. Me throwing myself at you and shoving my tongue down your throat isn't exactly cryptic. Gods, I couldn't have been more obvious..." She let out a self-depreciative scoff. "I asked you to dance. I... I wrapped myself around you like a grindylow! You must have felt how much I wanted you, and you just let it happen. You left my door last night letting me believe something had changed between us; then it was 'business as usual' this morning. Why couldn't you have just told me last night? Why did you have to wait until now to tell me you want nothing to do with me?"

*Well done, Severus. Now she thinks you used her, then didn't even bother to let her down softly. You absolute fuck-up.*

"Listen to me. I didn't know how you felt about me. I thought you were just enjoying getting to me. I shouldn't have lashed out at you. It wasn't my intent to hurt you. I was just... out of my depth."

"What do you mean?"

"I arrived to find you with your back to me, talking to... Lupin. I thought you were purposely ignoring me again. I thought..." He chuckled at the irony of it. "I thought what you are thinking, that last night had just been a part of your game, and this morning was, as you put, 'business as usual.'"

Hermione stared hard at him, as if searching for the truth in his eyes, until he felt fidgety and spoke again. "I acted on impulse, and in the process, I gave you the wrong idea. I apologize for that; it's not what I wanted."

"What do you want?" she said quietly.

Severus gave her a small smile. "What I want is for us to start this conversation over, this time sans misunderstandings."

"And last night?"

Severus looked right her eyes. "Last night was... overpowering, and it was more than lust, at least in the beginning. Towards the end there..." He cleared his throat, remembering how he'd shoved her up against her own door and ground his cock into her stomach. "I came to breakfast this morning prepared to apologize for losing control like I did, but... if you truly feel about me the way you said, I would think that renders that particular apology unnecessary." He gave her a smirk that held more warmth than smugness.

Hermione flushed, embarrassed that she'd reacted so dramatically and mortified that she'd given herself away completely in the process, but if he noticed, he didn't mention it.

"Now that we understand one another, I want to ask you if you'd be willing to let me... court you." He cringed at the word, knowing it sounded old fashioned, but unable to think of something more eloquent. "This time without any pretext between us."

Hermione gave him a small but genuine smile. "Yes, I think I'd be quite willing."

Severus allowed a pleasant rush to flow through him at her smile and her words. He was in uncharted territory and had no idea what he was doing, but he was ready to take the plunge. However, he thought it would a good idea to warn her, just so his rear was covered in the likely event that he fucked up again.

"I feel I should warn you that I've never tried to have this type of relationship. Relationships in general, you've likely noticed, are not my forte. I've no doubt that I'll do something to... I think you understand what I'm telling you."

She nodded. "Severus, the biggest problems in relationships come from a lack of communication. If we are open and honest with each other, we can avoid misunderstandings. Neither of us are perfect, but if we just talk to each other, I think we could have a chance at something special."

Severus thought she was right.

"And," she continued a bit shyly, "about last night..." She looked him right in the eyes and said quietly, "I've never felt anything like that."

Severus felt elation flood through him. So she'd felt it, too. Knowing that he wasn't the only one feeling that their connection had been something incredible pleased him very much. "Nor I," he said sincerely and moved a bit closer to her. "I've been concerned that you might have been frightened by my intensity. I don't..." He scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably. "I don't know where that came from."

She smirked. "I don't know where it came from either, but you're right; it was rather intense. But not in a bad way. It just took me by surprise, and you're not the only one who lost control."

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. The truth was he'd been just as surprised by how strongly he had reacted, so it was indeed fortunate that she wasn't put off by his passion. "Where do we go from here?" he asked.

"Well," she said, considering the question, "given how easy it was for both of us to overreact this morning and jump to conclusions, I'd say it's obvious that we don't know each other very well yet."

He nodded. That was certainly true. Perhaps if he'd known her better, he wouldn't have assumed she was ignoring him. He felt a bit dense that he'd been so far off about her motives and not just about what had happened this morning. He felt he should have realized that she was trying to get him to pay attention to her. Looking back on it now, he thought it should have been obvious. He had no idea *why* she'd wanted to get his attention, though. This was something he intended to find out.

"I think that we should take this, whatever *this* is " she gestured between them " slowly."

Slowly? Meaning what, that a repeat of last night was out of the question? "How slowly?" he asked.

"Well, my father's birthday is the Saturday after next... Would you like to meet my parents?"

*That's taking it slowly?* he thought with alarm. What if they didn't get along? What if her parents told her they thought she could do better? He'd have liked to secure her affections a little more before they made their relationship more public assuming of course that the brief scene at breakfast hadn't given them away. "So soon?" he asked.

Hermione, seeing his hesitance, wondered if she shouldn't have brought it up. It was new after all. Maybe he thought that was too big a step. She'd just thought they should approach this like an honest relationship, and meeting her parents seemed to her be a step towards that honesty. "Oh, uh... I mean, if you don't want to, it's okay I just thought that... you know, since you were going to... uh, *court me*, you might want to meet my family. I... Just forget I said anything. You can meet them another time."

Severus was silent for a minute, thinking. That was almost two weeks away, and maybe he was making a bigger deal of it in his mind than it was. It was true, after all, that meeting her parents was a logical step and would make the relationship feel more real. "I think, Hermione, that I would like to meet your parents."

"Oh," she said. "Then, you'll come with me?"

He nodded, and she smiled, relieved. "Until then," he said, "we still need to find a test subject, and I think it would be appropriate to spend some time together, getting acquainted."

"Right. By the way, I was thinking about that, about testing on a human, and I think I have the perfect subject. I have a friend who works in Chinese Arithmancy. In fact, a lot of the ideas I had for our potion were ones I remember discussing with him when we worked on our Arithmancy in Potions Making project in my second year at University. He speaks fluent Chinese, so we could test the potion on him and see what he has to say about our project. Would you like me to contact him?"

Severus considered this. It sounded like a good enough idea to him, and it would make any further searching for a subject unnecessary. "That sounds fine. Be sure to let him know I'll be compensating him for his time and contribution to the project."

Hermione nodded. "And about the 'getting acquainted' part?"

Severus smirked. "I might as well make this proper. Miss Granger, Hermione, would you care to have dinner with me tonight in my chambers?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I'd like that."

"Very well. Seven o' clock then."

"I'll be there. Have a good day, Severus." A bell rang to signal that classes would begin soon, and Hermione gave him a warm smile that lit up her eyes, then left.

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The day went by quickly enough. By lunchtime Hermione had written to her friend, Chen. She took a detour by the Owlery and sent off the letter, then made her way to the Great Hall for lunch. She was feeling slightly anxious about what she might find there. She didn't think the few words she'd said to Severus before she'd had the sense to leave had been loud enough to be heard by others, but she wasn't sure.

She wasn't really ready to deal with the opinions most people would likely feel the need to share, not while her relationship with Severus was still so new and delicate.

It turned out that luck was with her. The only person who had noticed anything amiss was Remus, and he quickly pulled her aside and whispered, "Is there something going on between you and Severus that I should know about?"

"You heard? Who else heard? What are they all saying?" she asked in alarm.

"No, I'm pretty sure I'm the only one," he assured her. "What's going on, Hermione? It sounded like... Did heDid that bastard do som?"

She shook her head. "No. It was just a misunderstanding."

He looked at her suspiciously.

"Really," she said. "Remus, please don't say anything to anyone. This is all new, and I don't want any rumors circulating."

"So I was right," he said. "There is something going on."

"Yes," she said simply, "but it's no one else's business, so please, don't say anything."

After a long silence, he said, "All right. I won't. Just be careful, Hermione. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Hermione gave him a smile, but said nothing more. This was not a conversation she wanted to have.

By seven, she was more than ready to spend some time with Severus. She changed from her normal teaching robes to casual jeans and a comfortable sweater in a cream color. The walk to his quarters was filled with nervous excitement. She didn't know what to expect, but that was part of what made this so fantastic she would finally be getting to see the man behind the master. She knocked on Severus' door, and he opened it quickly. He motioned for her to come in, and she found herself in a sitting room much like her own. A fire was going, heating the room and adding to the light.

She noticed that Severus was also dressed casually. His usual robes were gone, replaced by a pair of black trousers and a plain, white shirt with a row of buttons down the front. She thought the relaxed look was nice on him. He looked much more approachable, though he still looked a bit tense, sending her a glance, then looking away.

There was a silence for a moment, and it became clear to Hermione that he was waiting on her to make the first move, unsure of what she would want or allow. She caught his eye, and before she could lose her nerve, she moved forward and gave him a light kiss on the corner of his mouth. "Hi," she said with a grin. She felt him relax noticeably, and then he returned her kiss for a moment before pulling back to look into her eyes.

"I wasn't sure what you would prefer to eat, so I took the liberty of alerting the house-elves that we'd be dining in. We can decide what we'd like, and they'll bring it to us when we're ready."

"That sounds fine," she said with a smile. "I'm quite hungry. Anything would be good at this point."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be a bit more specific than that, or the house-elves will bring something of everything."

She laughed. "In that case, I think I have an appetite for roast beef."

He nodded and muttered something. Moments later, two plates of roast beef and vegetables appeared on his coffee table along with a pitcher of water.

Soon, they were eating in companionable silence with the occasional random comment. When they were finished, Severus muttered something else, and the plates vanished. Hermione leaned back into the leather sofa and closed her eyes, pleasantly full.

Severus watched her, wondering what he should do now. He hadn't really planned past the actual eating part of the evening, not wanting to presume anything and truly not knowing what to expect. He found he was comfortable just to watch her. Though she looked as she usually did with her hair pulled back and her slightly loose-fitting clothing, his opinion of her beauty had been irrevocably altered by their dinner and all that followed the previous night. He'd seen her as a woman, seen the curves that were downplayed by the fit of her usual teaching robes, and now he'd never see her any other way, no matter what she was wearing.

Hermione open her eyes and saw that he was watching her. She smiled and shifted closer to him. "So, Severus, what happens now?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

She grinned. "Well, I'd say we should commence getting acquainted. That was the plan, right?"

"And how would you suggest we go about that, Hermione?"

"I have a few ideas," she said, tilting her head playfully.

"Oh?"

She nodded.

"Enlighten me."

"Well " She moved closer. "We could try this..." She pressed her lips to his cheek and settled against him. "Or this..." She kissed the corner of his mouth again, this time bringing her hands up to stroke the base of his neck, threading her fingers through the hair there.

Severus felt his heart speeding up and gripped her arms, shifting to accommodate her better. He turned his head a bit and put his lips right against hers, encouraging her to kiss him properly.

"Or we could... talk."

"Talk?" he murmured against her mouth.

"Well, we did say she should be getting to know more about each other."

"Right," he said, letting his eyes flutter closed as she brushed her parted lips against his. He thought hazily that there was more than one way to get to know her. They could spend time getting comfortable with each other, like this, and other times finding out more about each other. There could be a balance between the two, right? As long as he didn't lose control like he had last night, he saw nothing wrong with enjoying being close to her.

With that thought, he shifted until he was reclining back against the arm of the sofa and pulled Hermione against him, wrapping his arms securely around her back. She relaxed into his body and sighed, letting her weight rest on him and opening her mouth to encourage him to explore.

She didn't want to move too fast, but this felt right. It wasn't hurried or hungry as it had been the night before. She didn't feel in danger of losing herself. This was just pleasurable, fulfilling. There was no need to turn it into something more demanding.

They went on that way for quite a while. Severus felt exhilarated by the lightness in his head and the warm feeling that was filling his chest. This closeness felt wonderful, and he loved the taste of her. She held nothing back from him, wanting him to feel what she was feeling.

Their leisurely exploration came to a close as Hermione pulled back with a sigh, pressing easy kisses to his lips before sliding down his body a bit and resting her head on his chest, her temple fitting into the hollow of his throat.

The feeling of connection remained as they both rested, the firelight flickering and casting dim shadows across the room. Severus felt Hermione's breathing deepen and realized she had fallen asleep. He reached up with one hand and stroked her hair, brushing it off her forehead so he could see her face.

Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was slightly parted. He brushed his thumb lightly across her cheek, thinking she looked beautiful and feeling that warmth grow in his chest as he realized that she trusted him enough to let go of consciousness in his presence.

He watched her for a long time before he drifted off himself, his last hazy thought being that she was ~~his~~.

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Hermione woke up some hours later. She realized where she was and smiled, wishing she could stay that way all night, but she knew she needed to get back to her quarters. She sighed and finally lifted her head, wondering if she should wake Severus or not. He looked so peaceful asleep like that. She didn't want to disturb him, but she also didn't want to leave without letting him know she was going. She didn't want another repeat of breakfast, and who knew what he might assume if he woke up to find her gone without an explanation?

"Severus," she whispered, and his eyes fluttered open. He looked at her for a moment, and she grinned. "Hi."

"Mmmh," he muttered and closed his eyes again. "What time is it?"

"It's late. I need to get back to my rooms."

He nodded and muttered something else that she couldn't understand. "Right," he said finally, waking up a bit more. "I'll walk you."

"No need. I just didn't want you to wake up and wonder where I'd gone. Go back to sleep." She gave him a quick kiss and got up off the couch. She straightened her clothes and gave him a smile. "I'll see you in the morning."

He smiled back at her sleepily. "You sure you don't need me to walk you?"

She nodded and turned to go, saying softly, "Goodnight, Severus."

"Goodnight, Hermione," she heard him say as she left, closing the door quietly behind her.

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**SB's Notes:** Hope it was worth the two day wait. ;-) No, seriously. I hope you didn't find Severus too soft. I tried to keep him as in character as possible considering I'm also trying to have him falling in love. I'd love to know what you're all thinking. The next chapter will be up in two days!

Thanks for reading!

## Touching and Testing

The relationship progresses more, and Severus experiences that little monster called jealousy. There is a test, which proves *testing* in more ways than one, and Severus feels more apprehension about the upcoming birthday dinner.

*Disclaimer: I make no money from writing this fic. It's just for fun. A lot of fun.*

Thanks go, as always, to my friend and beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, for the time she spends helping me and for the excellent work she does.

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## Touching and Testing

Over the next week or so, it was more of the same. After the first night, the uncertainty and formality began to slip away, and both became more comfortable in the other's presence. They spent most evenings in either his quarters or hers, talking and kissing, falling asleep together several more times. Severus managed to wake himself up on the nights he had to patrol. After that first night, neither had felt the need to wake the other when they left. It was an unspoken understanding that they'd rather not wake each other if they could help it, and neither took offense to waking up alone.

During the days, Severus found himself thinking about Hermione almost constantly, and when he wasn't actively dwelling on her, remembering a particular kiss or smile, she was there in the back of his mind. His students all wondered about the sudden drop off in the amount of points he took for random offences, but no one was foolish enough to look a gift horse in the mouth. Whatever had him distracted, they hoped it was permanent.

Severus didn't truly realize how hard he had fallen until the following Tuesday when Hermione received an owl at lunch from her Arithmancy friend. He saw her bright smile as she read the letter, then turned to him after to tell him that her friend, Chen, was interested in being their test subject. She told him how glad she'd be to see Chen since she hadn't seen him since university.

A stab of inexplicable jealousy ran through him, and he had the completely irrational thought that *Chen* was the stupidest name he'd ever heard. Just as quickly as the thought had been there, he realized how childish a thing it was to think and wondered where the hell it had come from.

For one moment, he'd been truly, madly jealous at the thought of Hermione happy to see another man. He realized how inappropriate that was; they'd only been "dating" for a week. He knew logically that there was nothing to be jealous of, that she was just happy to see a friend, but he couldn't dismiss the fact that the jealousy had been there, had seized him as a gut reaction. That thought gave him pause.

He realized that though they'd only been seeing each other for a short time, he considered Hermione to be *his*. He'd considered her to be his for maybe even longer than she'd *been* his perhaps not nearly to this extent, but on some level he must have. Why else would her ignoring him have bothered him so much? He'd taken for granted that she would always be there to smile at him, and when she'd stopped, he'd felt like something that was his, even something as simple as the warmth she'd always shown him, had been taken from him.

And now, apparently, just her mentioning another man sent a stab of possessiveness through him that was beyond his control. What did that mean?

It was then that he realized, with a great deal of astonishment, how deep his feelings for her ran. Even more amazing was that even as he realized he was in over his head, he realized he didn't care. The way he felt, the time he'd been spending with her, all of it was *right*. For once in his life, giving up control was proving to be the right thing to do. He was experiencing something new with Hermione every day, and if he hadn't taken the plunge and opened himself up to her, none of it would be happening.

As startling as the revelation of the depth of his feelings was, he thought it was worth it. As long as he could go on experiencing these moments with Hermione, as long as he could *keep* Hermione, the loss of control was something he could live with. In fact, he thought he would like to explore just how deep his feelings could go.

"Are you listening to me, Severus?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"What?" he said, her voice drawing him back to reality. "Yes, of course. What were you saying?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was telling you that Chen could be here on Friday evening. I asked you if you'd like me to confirm?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

"Right then." Hermione conjured a pen and immediately scrawled a response and tied it to the owl's leg. She watched with a smile as it flew away.

Severus could only watch her, his heart thudding in his chest as he lost himself to his observation, the rest of the world falling silent. She met his eyes, and he felt another streak of possessiveness grip him, but this time he didn't question it. Instead, he shifted his chair imperceptibly closer to her.

They still hadn't shown any outward sign of their new relationship in front of anyone else. Both of them were private people and didn't want to open up something they considered to be so personal to be gossiped about. But as he took in the affection in her eyes that she probably didn't even realize was there, he had an urge to take her hand, implications be damned. He resisted, giving her a small wink instead, then turned back to his lunch.

Hermione noticed how focused he was on her and wondered what he was thinking. This past week had been wonderful. She loved every moment she got to spend with him, even enjoyed his sarcastic comments and grumbled complaints because they came from *him*. She almost giggled at that thought. She was downright besotted, and she knew it.

She'd been in love with him for a long time, but the reality of having him made it so much more. She was giddy half the time. She often caught herself grinning broadly about how lucky she was to be *with* him after so long of wanting him and thinking it would just have to stay an unfilled desire.

But it hadn't. Somehow, fortune had landed her in Severus' arms, and she couldn't have been happier about it.

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That night, they both took dinner in the Great Hall simply because they didn't want their absences to be routine enough to notice. Severus asked Hermione where they'd be spending the evening.

"Acutally," she said, "I'm afraid I've gotten behind on my marking. I really need to get some done tonight."

Severus thought this meant he'd be spending the evening alone, and he sighed inwardly, but she surprised him.

"If you'd like, you can bring some of your own to my chambers, or a book, or something," she said. "That way we don't have to give up our time together."

He snorted amusedly. "Not much to give up if we'll both be busy with something else." He meant it as a joke, but Hermione's silence caused him to pause. He turned to her, wondering why she hadn't said anything, and was surprised as he watched the blood drain out of her face.

"Oh," she said. "You're probably right. I just... thought that... never mind."

A week ago, he probably wouldn't have noticed the hurt in her voice, but now it was loud and clear. He was confused. What had he said wrong?



"Hermione?"

She was deep in thought, chewing on her lower lip, and she barely heard him. The truth was that she felt that any time spent in his company was time well spent. It wouldn't have mattered to her what they were doing as long as they were together. She just wanted to be with him. Had she been wrong in assuming he felt the same way? She didn't want to jump to conclusions, but the thought that he might only consider her company worthwhile if they were kissing... hurt.

"What's wrong?" Severus asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly, then remembered as he raised his eyebrows that they needed to be able to talk to one another. How would she know what he was thinking if she didn't ask? She looked into his eyes reluctantly and swallowed. "I just... I thought it would be nice to have you there with me, even if we were just marking essays. I... I enjoy your company, even when we're not... you know, and I thought you felt the same. Was I wrong? Do you only want to spend time with me if we're..."

"No," he said quickly. "Of course not." He was mentally kicking himself. Of course he wanted to spend time with her. It didn't matter what they were doing. He'd be happy just to have her in the same room. Why had he said that? Did he really only want to spend time with her if it involved kissing and touching? No. That wasn't it. He enjoyed that part of their relationship very much, but he'd realized over the last week, and especially at lunch today, that his feelings for her were based on more than something purely physical. That was the last thing he wanted her to think.

"Then, what is it?" she asked, confused. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No, Hermione." He shook his head, leaning in close enough for only her to hear him not that anyone could have anyway with all the noise and chatter in the hall. "There's nothing to tell. I made an unintelligent joke that I hadn't thought through. I didn't consider how it could be taken. Of course I want to spend the evening with you. It doesn't matter what we're doing. Actually," he said thoughtfully, "I do have some marking I could do, too."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief in and let herself smile.

"If the offer's still open, I'll just stop by my quarters and meet you there."

"It is... open, that is. I'll leave the door unlocked."

He nodded and took one more sip of his wine before he left. Hermione finished her meal and left about fifteen minutes later. She had barely closed the door to her chambers when Severus came in after her with a stack of papers in his hand.

She left him in her sitting room and went to change out of her teaching robes. She called to him and told him to make himself comfortable. When she returned minutes later, he had transfigured her sofa and coffee table into two chairs and two glass-top desks and was already occupying one of them, busily marking away. She usually did this in her study, but it would work just as well.

They spent a couple of hours like this until Hermione was as caught up as she needed to be. She glanced over at Severus to measure his progress through his stack of essays and found him watching her, no essays in sight.

"How long have you been finished?" she asked.

"Not long," he replied, yawning a bit. He stood and helped her to her feet, then lazily transfigured her furniture back to its proper form. "Now," he said, turning to her, "I have a little problem that needs attending to."

Hermione reflexively glanced down at his groin, and he chuckled. "Not that sort of problem. At least, not yet. I'm sure that will also be a problem in a short while if I get my way."

Hermione grinned coquettishly. "And what way would that be?"

"I've just spent the last ten minutes watching you gnaw on that lip of yours. I'm afraid it's given me some rather detailed ideas about what I'd like to do with it myself."

"Oh?"

"Indeed," he murmured as he pulled her against him and lowered his mouth to claim hers.

She relaxed against him as she felt his tongue dart into her mouth. After a few minutes of increasingly frenzied exploration, Hermione felt him growing hard against her stomach and felt her body heating up in a way it hadn't since that first night. The kisses they'd shared since then had been wonderful, but this was quickly becoming something different, something hungrier. She felt him rocking his erection against her gently and moaned into his mouth, and he moaned back.

Severus, for his part, had kept his more primal side at bay all week, knowing that they both needed the time to feel more comfortable with one another. He hadn't let himself become too aroused before tonight. He hadn't really *intended* for things to turn that way now, but it was rapidly becoming out of his hands. She was responding eagerly to the demands of his mouth, her hands clutching the fabric of his shirt tightly. Her little moans were making his head spin.

She felt so good rubbing against his cock like that. He slid his hands down and gripped her arse, pulling her against him and grinding harder, remembering how forcefully he had come by his own hand, just by thinking about her. It was completely intoxicating. Without even thinking about what he was doing, he sort of stumbled into a seat on the couch and pulled her onto him so she was straddling him. His hands cupped her arse again as he pulled her down against his erection and ground up.

He gave a low moan and let his head fall back. He was rapidly losing control again, and he hoped Hermione didn't mind, but any doubts he had about her willingness vanished as she attacked his neck with her mouth, groaning as she rocked her heated center against him, relieving some of the awful pressure there.

"Touch me," she said huskily. Severus was only too happy to oblige her. He kept one hand on her arse, setting the pace for her hips with a gentle pressure, and slid the other up to her breast, grinding his thumb in circles against her nipple through the fabric of her cotton blouse.

She shuddered. "More," she almost whimpered. He looked into her eyes dazedly; most of his consciousness was focused on the wonderful friction against his cock. But he still had enough sense to recognize a woman in need. He didn't waste time with the buttons of her blouse; he just used both hands to reach under the hem and bunch it up over the top of her breasts, then pushed the cups up, freeing them. If he hadn't already been so far gone, he would have appreciated the fact that he was staring at Hermione's breasts for the first time for the tremendous moment that it was, but his body was only telling him *more, now...*

He leaned forward and licked one puckered nipple as his fingers cupped and stroked her other breast, and she bucked hard against him, whimpering. "That's so good..."

Severus grunted something unintelligible and continued his ministrations, snaking one hand back down to rest on her hip, her body now thrusting against him without any help from him.

Suddenly she pulled his mouth away from her breast and back to hers. Her tongue plundered his mouth unmercifully until she pulled back and stared into his eyes.

"Oh, God, Severus, I'm going to come... Severus, I'm..." She threw her head back and cried out. Severus wished he'd been closer so he could have come with her, but watching her face twist and flush as she orgasmed was a beautiful thing in and of itself. Her shuddering finally subsided, and she met his eyes again. She smiled, and he thought they were finished, but again, she surprised him.

"Severus," she whispered, "can I touch you?"

*Can she touch me? Merlin, yes...* He nodded, hoping she meant she wanted to touch his cock. She did. He groaned as she reached between them and unzipped his trousers. They both watched as she pulled his erection out of his shorts. She held her hand still as she gripped him, looking at his pulsing cock with fascination.

She swiped the pad of her thumb over the head, smearing a bit of the liquid she found there, and he gritted his teeth. She stroked him once experimentally and watched his face for a reaction. When he hissed and bit his lip, she knew she'd done something right. She repeated the action several times and felt more confident when his eyes rolled back in his head. She'd had sex before, but she'd never done *this*. It reassured her to know it was affecting him so.

She began stroking him in earnest, all the while watching his face to make sure he was enjoying it and loving that she was doing this to him. After a few minutes, she felt his body begin to shudder, so she sped up. His cocked swelled in her hand, and she knew he was getting close.

He confirmed this, thrusting up hard into her hand and moaning, "Don't stop, don't stop, almost, there... Now, coming *Now, Hermione!*"

She watched in fascination as first his face contorted as if in agony, then as his mouth went slack, and she could feel the warmth of his seed as it covered her hand. He let out a final, forceful sigh, and Hermione was understandably pleased with herself. He went boneless as she leaned forward and rested against him, smiling against his shoulder.

After a moment, he muttered a cleansing spell and wrapped his arms around her, sighing again. "Thank you, Hermione," he said.

"Don't mention it." She thought she should really be thanking him. She felt him shift and watched as he put his flaccid cock back into his trousers and fastened them. She smirked and gave him a quick kiss, then rested against him again, feeling content.

He muttered another spell, and Hermione felt her sofa shift again as it became a sort of makeshift recliner. Severus leaned back and pulled Hermione with him until she was draped over him and he was lying almost horizontally. He tucked her head under her chin and rubbed her back lightly with his palm. Soon, they were both asleep, and this time, they slept the night through.

In the morning, they both awoke early, and Severus left before it got too late. Neither wanted to risk that someone would see him exiting Hermione Granger's quarters and wonder why.

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Friday arrived, and with it came the nervousness and jealousy that Severus thought he was too old, too this, and too that to be feeling. If he could just get through the *testing* with his dignity intact, he could deal with his foolishness at a later date.

The evening came, and Severus waited quietly in his lab for Hermione and *Chen* to arrive. She'd told him at lunch that Chen would be arriving around six and would come to her quarters first before they'd join him in his lab. Severus had bit his lip to keep from snapping out something he'd regret. She had told him she'd explain everything in further detail to Chen on the way.

Just how much would she be explaining? Would she let him know that they were seeing each other, that she was *his*, or would he have to explain *it* for her? Just what was her history with this *Chen* person? How well had they known each other at university? He smugly thought that *he'd* known her for longer and that *he* had her now, and then he rolled his eyes at himself for his childishness but the thought that he had something over Chen because he'd been a part of her life for much longer didn't cease to give him vindictive pleasure.

By the time Hermione and Chen arrived at his lab, Severus, in his mind, had constructed an image of a handsome, suave, devious bastard who was just waiting for the right moment to make his move on Hermione. When he opened the door and saw Hermione arm in arm with the man, grinning, he nearly growled. As it turned out, the man in front of him didn't quite match the image he'd constructed he was shorter than Hermione and had a sort of mousy look to him but there was still the fact that he and Hermione were linked arm in arm.

They stepped into the lab and Hermione introduced them. "Severus, this is Chen Gao. Chen, Severus Snape."

"Hello, Professor Snape," Chen said in a plain British accent that surprised Severus for some reason the Chen in his mind spoke with a condescending Oriental twang. "It's an honor to finally meet you. Hermione's always had wonderful things to say about you."

Severus watched as Hermione blushed, and he felt the knot in his stomach loosen. "Oh?"

Chen nodded, but didn't elaborate, which disappointed Severus. But at least now he wasn't seeing green, much.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Hermione said, nodding to Severus.

Any lingering jealousy and worry he'd felt lifted bit by bit as the testing went on and there was obviously nothing more than friendly companionship between Hermione and Chen then disappeared completely when the testing had been completed successfully and the three of them were standing around discussing this and that; Hermione moved closer to Severus mid conversation and casually, but plainly, took his hand and threaded her fingers through his.

In front of anyone else, it might have made him uncomfortable, but in this situation, it was just what was needed to reassure him and put him at ease. She did it so naturally and didn't even blink or pause in her sentence when Chen's gaze flickered down to their joined hands. Severus squeezed her hand once to show that the gesture was welcome, and that was that.

After Chen left, Hermione turned to Severus and smiled brightly. "That went well."

"Indeed."

"Would you say the test was sufficient enough to satisfy the Licensing Office?"

"Yes, quite sufficient," he said, nodding. "It's just a matter now of the patent. Then we'll have a solicitor take care of the marketing aspect."

"This is so exciting, Severus," she said, moving in and hugging him happily. "I know I'm being silly, but I've never been a part of something like this. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be involved."

Severus hugged her back and smirked. Now was as good a time as any to confess. She'd figure it out eventually anyway. "About that," he said. "I'm afraid I have a bit of a confession to make."

She pulled back and scanned his face worriedly. "What?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

He chuckled. "No. There's just... I may as well just say it. I didn't give you the opportunity to be involved, Hermione. You created it yourself."

She looked at him in confusion.

"I wouldn't have even thought of the project if it hadn't been for you."

"What?"

He nodded. "I was irritated with the distance you were maintaining and wanted you to have no choice but to acknowledge me, so I asked for your assistance with the potion."

"Yes, I know. I figured that was why you asked me. I was so proud of myself that I'd gotten to you and that you were finally paying attention to me." She chuckled, amused with herself.

"Yes, well, what you apparently hadn't figured out was that at the time I asked for your assistance, there was no project. After you agreed to help me, I spent the week inventing the project so that when you arrived, I would have a legitimate excuse for having asked you. But then, by the time that night came, I was genuinely interested in what my little scheme had morphed into."

Hermione's mouth gaped open.

"So you see, you have just as much right to claim ownership of the Deciphering Draught as I have, as it wouldn't exist if not for you. That's why I insisted on you having an equal share."

Hermione started giggling, and her giggles quickly turned into uncontrollable laughter that had her bent over and clutching her stomach.

Severus didn't think it was that funny, but he enjoyed seeing her laugh, so he just watched, finding how extreme her reaction was to be much more amusing than the original confession.

"You," she finally choked out, "*scheming*. And me... my clever little plan. Oh, God..." She wiped tears from her eyes. "Oh... That's too perfect."

He raised his eyebrows in a silent request for her to elaborate.

"It's just," she said, the last of her chuckles finally dying away to be replaced by a grin, "I thought I was so clever getting you to ask me to help you, and the whole time you had a plan of your own, which of course you would. I don't know why I thought you would just passively take my bait. The whole time I thought I was the one in control."

He just stared at her, barely restraining the smile that was playing around his lips.

"Not that funny when I say it out loud," she said. "But in my head..." She laughed again. "You must think I'm crazy."

He snorted. "No crazier than I."

She moved in and hugged him again, and this time he did smile. "I don't think you're crazy. I think you're brilliant."

He tilted her chin up with his fingers and proceeded to prove just how brilliant he thought she was. This soon led to more, and they barely made it through the door of his chambers and onto his sofa before a spectacular repeat of the night before last left them boneless and sleepy.

This time it was Hermione who had to leave quietly before the hustle and bustle of the castle, even on a Saturday, made it difficult for her to get back to her own quarters unseen.

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At dinner, Hermione reminded Severus that the next day was her father's birthday. Severus hadn't even thought about it since she'd first mentioned it, but this time, instead of the reflexive alarm he'd felt when she'd asked him if he'd wanted to meet her parents, he felt a different kind of apprehension. This time, it wasn't the thought that it was too soon that had him swallowing thickly; it was that he was afraid he'd screw it up. He found he *wanted* to meet her parents because it would mean she was making him an official part of her life. He was just nervous about all the things that could go wrong.

He wasn't exactly the type that most women would bring home to 'meet the family.'

He took a deep breath as he listened to Hermione. "I've spoken with my mother, and they'd like for us to be there around 4:30."

"Us?"

She faltered. "Yes, us. I thought you said you wanted to come."

"I did. That's not what I mean. I was asking if your parents are aware that you won't be coming alone."

"Oh," she said. "Yes, I told my mother I'd be bringing someone with me."

"Someone?"

"A man."

He arched a brow, and she rolled her eyes. "Yes, a man I'm seeing. They know about our relationship."

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. That would be one less thing they would have to explain to her parents. But then that thought led him to another, and he had to ask.

"Hermione, are they aware that I am the man you are seeing?"

She bit her lip.

"Your ex-professor? The man twice your age that you no doubt told them horror stories about during your school years?"

"Severus, I have never told them horror stories about you; I've never had anything but words of respect for you, even when I was irritated with your treatment of me and my friends, and you are not twice my age."

"Nearly."

She rolled her eyes again. "No, I have not told them that the man I'm seeing is my ex-professor or that he is older than I am because it doesn't matter to me. I don't want them to focus on that. If I tell them beforehand, it will just be opening the door for them to build up an opinion of you before they meet you. I want us all to start off on the right foot, okay?"

Severus nodded. What she was saying made sense, but still, he couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't wise not to give her parents time to get used to the idea first.

"Hermione, what are they going to say when they open the door expecting to find someone young and handsome, and they find *me*? Don't you think it would be better to soften the blow first?"

Hermione snorted. "Blow? It's not as if I'm telling them I'm pregnant and moving to the States. It will be fine. You are not bad news, Severus. And you may not be as young as I am, but you are handsome."

Severus narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips as if to say, 'You must be joking.'

"You are," she insisted. "To me, you are. I like the way you look." She gave him a true smile and squeezed his hand briefly under the table.

"Really?" he asked, truly wanting to understand what she liked about his looks.

"Yes, really." She realized his fragile male ego needed stroking, and she didn't mind doing it. She really did think he was handsome, so she wasn't spewing false compliments. "I like your eyes, and your jaw, the sharpness of your features. Your hair, now that you keep it clean. I like that you're taller than me, and I like that you keep your body in shape. And, yes," she said with a smirk, "I like your nose. It suits you."

"You like all that about me?" he asked, honestly bewildered, but nonetheless pleased and wanting to hear her confirm it one more time.

"Yes, I do. And those are just the things I like about you physically. There's more under the surface, and tomorrow my parents are going to see that, too, and once they have, it won't matter how old you are or that you were my professor."

Severus felt much better after that, realizing that Hermione wouldn't change her opinion of him no matter what happened when he met her parents.

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They fell asleep that night on Severus' sofa, at opposite ends, after spending several hours taking turns reading aloud and massaging each other's feet. Hermione realized as she left in the early hours of the morning that they hadn't kissed once the entire night. Oddly enough, that put a smile on her face.

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**SB's Notes:** You may be able to tell how much fun I had writing that smut. It may not be the smuttiest of smut, but I hope it got the job done satisfactorily, so to speak. lol

Thanks for sticking with me. Only two more chapters to go! As always, your thoughts and comments are welcome and appreciated.

Next up we meet the parents. Now *that* was fun to write.

:D

## Dinner and Deliberation

### Chapter 5 of 6

Severus meets the parents, and Hermione's mother brings up a touchy subject afterwards. How will they handle it?

*Disclaimer: I make no money from this piece of fiction. I'm only in it for the smut... er, fun.*

Thanks go to the wonderful Southern\_Witch\_69 for her help and beta reading, without which this chapter would be a disaster.

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### Dinner and Deliberation

Severus showed up at Hermione's door only a few hours after waking up so that they could have an early lunch together, thinking it would be wise to eat now so that they'd be hungry again by 4:30. He admitted to himself privately that he had also just wanted to see her even though it had only been a few hours since he'd woken up on his sofa to find her gone but he didn't need to broadcast that. It was one thing to know that he was in deep and to even accept it, but it was quite another to tell Hermione that he'd felt cold without her near him and hadn't wanted to wait any longer to be in her presence especially when he was unsure of how deep her feelings for him ran in return.

That would be something they could discuss much, much further into their relationship. For now, he would just take it as it came.

"Is what I'm wearing acceptable, or should I change into something else?" he asked Hermione as she milled around her rooms, getting ready to leave.

She glanced at him. "No. What you're wearing is fine. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, I'm wearing robes. Perhaps something more common in the Muggle world would be more appropriate?"

"You are a wizard, Severus. I think you should wear whatever you are comfortable in."

"Yes, but... would your parents be more... accommodating if I was dressed in trousers and a shirt?"

Ah, so that's what he was asking, Hermione thought bemusedly. He was still worried about their reaction to him.

"My parents know that you are a wizard, Severus, and they know that a wizard generally wears robes. I think they would find it more odd if you were dressed in trousers and a shirt than the way you're dressed now."

He nodded, but still looked apprehensive. She walked over to stand in front of him and took his hands in hers. "Just be yourself."

He raised his eyebrows, and she smirked. "Obviously I'd prefer it if you didn't hex, snarl, or attempt to take house points from them, but I think you might find they appreciate your sarcasm. Well, my mum at least." She squeezed his hands, and Severus wondered what she meant by that last comment. "Just let me finish getting ready, and we'll go."

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Half an hour later, they Apparated together to a suburban neighborhood outside of London and walked down the street a short ways until Hermione turned to him with an encouraging smile and said, "This is the one, ready?"

Severus didn't say anything in return, just swallowed hard and let her lead him up the walk to a painted white door. Hermione rang the bell with one hand and held Severus' lightly with the other, which he refrained, barely, from squeezing hard enough to bruise.

"Hermione," her mother said brightly as she opened the door, "we're so glad you're here. Your father's been cooking up a storm all day."

Hermione chuckled. "Hi, Mum. Dad's in the kitchen now?"

"Yes," she said. "Why don't you come in and you can introduce us both to your friend at the same time."

She gave a quick glance to Severus but looked to be holding off on a closer inspection until they were in the door.

"Stephen!" Hermione's mother called. "They're here."

"I know," a voice called from another room. "I heard the bell!"

Hermione couldn't help laughing and shaking her head.

"I'll be there in a moment. Just taking the turkey out."

Severus shifted nervously as they waited, feeling as if he was about to be put in a display case for tourists to walk by and point at as they passed judgment and moved on.

"Ah, here he is," said Mrs. Granger as her husband came striding around the corner.

Severus took one look at Hermione's father and immediately felt relief. After all, it was hard to feel intimidated by a man who was only taller than he was because of the white, mushroom-topped chef's hat he was wearing, armed only with a spatula.

The man gave him an interested, quizzical look as he slid his arm, the non spatula-wielding one, around his wife and said to Hermione, "Hello, love. Who's your fellow?"

Hermione laughed, and Severus relaxed. "Mum, Dad, this is Severus Snape. Severus, these are my parents, Stephen and Maureen."

Severus, trying very hard not to stare at that ridiculous hat, met Stephen Granger's eyes with an offered hand and said, "Mr. Granger."

"Stephen, please!" He reached his hand forward to shake Severus' only to realize it was already occupied by a cooking utensil. "Hold this, Maureen."

She took the spatula from him, and he used his now free hand to return Severus' gesture firmly. If he noticed that Severus was neither young nor handsome, he didn't mention it.

Hermione's mother, however, was a different matter. As Severus turned to her to offer her his hand, she eyed him speculatively in a way that told Severus she had noticed both of those things. But she also refrained from commenting, taking his hand and shaking it instead.

Well," she said to them all, "supper should be ready soon, right, Stephen?"

"Quite, quite," he said jovially. "I'll have that back now." He took the spatula from his wife and sauntered back into the kitchen, whistling loudly.

"Since when do you need a spatula to cook a turkey?" Hermione whispered to her mother, who winked back, and Severus couldn't help but chuckle.

"I think it makes him feel the part," she murmured back. "I got him the hat and that spatula for Christmas, and he's been wearing it every time he cooks anything more than toast."

Hermione threw her head back and laughed. "Of course. I was wondering where he'd found that hat... Nice one, Mum."

She winked again and motioned for them to follow her into the dining room where Stephen was already carrying large bowls of salad, stuffing, and cranberry sauce to the table, whistling all the while. He disappeared as Hermione, Severus, and Maureen took their seats and returned moments later with a large, glazed turkey on a platter. He made a final trip and returned with a large carving knife and a hefty pitcher of ice water.

He turned to Severus and held out the knife. "Would you do the honors, Sean?"

"Severus, Dad," Hermione corrected, flushing a bit.

"Of course, my mistake," he said. "Would you like to carve the turkey, er, Severus?"

Severus was barely holding back his laughter. This was certainly not what he had been expecting. "Certainly, Stephen." He cut the turkey with a precision that obviously impressed Hermione's father, for he gave him an admiring nod of approval, as if his turkey carving skills alone had earned Severus his endorsement as a man worthy of his daughter.

Gods, this man was a character. Severus couldn't help but like him; flighty though he was, he seemed sincere and completely unpretentious.

Severus met Hermione's eyes and gave her a little wink that made her grin.

"Stephen, since it's your birthday, why don't you bless the meal," Maureen said as Stephen pulled out the remaining chair and took his seat across from Severus.

He gripped his wife's hand and reached for Severus' with his other. Severus looked at the offered hand uncertainly, then glanced at Hermione as she pulled their clasped hands from under the table and rested them on the tablecloth. She reached across the table and took her mother's hand with her other, and Severus got the idea. Hermione gave him a wink similar to the one he'd given her, and he reached forward and let Stephen grasp his hand.

"Lord, we ask a blessing on this turkey and the sides that I have prepared with it. Amen."

He let go of Severus' hand, and again, Severus had to stop himself from chuckling. It had been a rather abbreviated blessing, but it was the sincerity that counted, right?

Severus was unsure of the order in which the serving would take place and was relieved when all three Grangers reached for something different and began helping themselves. Hermione gave an encouraging smile to Severus. "Go ahead," she said. "There's plenty."

Severus didn't mind if he did.

"So, Severus," Maureen said as she poured herself a glass of water. "What do you do? And how did you meet our Hermione?"

Well, she certainly hadn't wasted any time. "I'm a professor, Mrs. Granger. I met your daughter at Hogwarts."

Maureen raised her eyebrows. "*Her* professor?"

"Mum," Hermione muttered. "I haven't been a student for five years."

But Maureen apparently wasn't satisfied with that answer. She looked at Severus expectantly. He knew he was going to have to be honest. "Yes, her professor."

Maureen's eyes narrowed a bit, and Hermione reached for Severus' hand again. "Mum, it wasn't like that. He never thought of me inappropriately or took advantage of me while I was a student. Our relationship didn't begin until I returned to Hogwarts this year."

"Is this true?" Maureen asked Severus seriously.

"Yes. Our relationship was never anything but that of teacher and student while she at school. We only began seeing one another romantically recently."

"I see," she said. "And is it... serious?"

"Mum!" Hermione said, flushing red. "That's none of your business!"

But Maureen wasn't deterred. Once again, she looked at Severus expectantly, but this time, he didn't have an answer for her. Was it serious? He could only speak for himself. Was it serious for him? Yes, very. This was the only relationship he'd ever been in, and he'd already admitted to himself that he felt very deeply for Hermione. But he didn't know how she felt. He couldn't tell anyone that their relationship was 'serious' without knowing where she stood.

"I... It's We're... Mrs. Granger"

"Mum," Hermione snapped, putting her foot down. "I didn't invite Severus so that you could interrogate him about our relationship. I invited him because I thought you'd like to meet the man I'm seeing. You've asked what he does for a living and how we met, and he answered honestly. Anything beyond that, anything about *our* relationship is not open for public discussion and is between Severus and me. Understood?"

Maureen pursed her lips but didn't press any further, and Severus breathed an inward sigh of relief, casting Hermione a grateful glance. "Fine, I shall restrict my comments to the weather."

"Does that mean I'm allowed to ask Septimus things that aren't about your relationship?" Stephen asked, inadvertently breaking the ice again.

Hermione smiled. "It's Severus, Dad, and yes, you can ask him whatever you'd like. Just keep in mind he has the right to not answer."

"Of course, only fair," Stephen said. He gave Severus a measuring look, and Severus didn't know whether to be afraid of this interrogation or excited, based purely on the entertainment value he instinctively knew it would be worth alone.

"You wouldn't happen to be much of a golfer, would you, Seven ... us?"

"*Severus*, Dad! Really, it's not that hard to remember!"

"No, Stephen, I can't say I've ever been golfing. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, no reason," he replied, and Severus wondered if he should be keeping track of how many times and in how many ways this man could mispronounce his name. Hermione was right; it wasn't that hard to remember, but he found himself hoping ridiculously that he would go on mispronouncing it. Sean had been good, but *Severus* would be hard to top.

"You know, Maureen and I are dentists."

"Yes, I'd heard that."

"That means we work on teeth professionally."

"Indeed," Severus said, already knowing where this was going, but strangely not minding having his teeth critiqued by this man, who hadn't a mean-spirited bone in his body.

"Rather," Stephen said with a nod. "If you and Hermione decide to make a go of it, you might consider letting us give your teeth a look."

"I'll keep that in mind," Severus said, glancing again at Hermione to find her with her head tilted down and her hand covering her eyes. Severus bit his lip.

"Good, good," Stephen said. "Do you mind me asking what subject you teach at Hogwarts, Severus?"

*Damn. Well, there goes my fun.* "Not at all, Stephen. I teach Potions."

"Oh! Marvelous! Hermione always did quite well in Potions, rather high marks."

"Yes, I remember," Severus said, and Hermione chuckled beside him.

This went on for quite a while Stephen asking question after question and Severus answering each, wondering in the beginning how they were related but soon giving up on trying to make sense of Hermione's father and just enjoying himself instead.

When dinner was through, Stephen retreated back into the kitchen to retrieve his own birthday cake, which he had both baked and decorated.

"We have a tradition, Severus," Hermione said as her father began to gouge the cake with spiraled, wax candles.

Severus looked at the large box of candles and thought, *Surely he doesn't mean to stick in one for every year.* How old was he anyway? But Stephen stopped suddenly and handed the box to Hermione. Severus only counted eleven candles. He looked at Hermione in confusion as she began inserting candles in random places, and she explained.

"Since there are only three of us in our family, we thought we'd make every birthday special for all of us, so when it comes time for the cake, we each add up the numbers in our current age. Dad is turning fifty-six, so he added eleven candles. I'm twenty-three, so I'm added five." She finished inserting her last candle and handed the box to Severus, who began sticking his seven in a row on the top left corner of the cake.

"Seven," Stephen said, doing the math. "That makes you either thirty-four, forty-three, or fifty-two. I'm guessing forty-three?"

"Last month," Severus replied with a smirk, then handed the box to Maureen, who inserted eight candles of her own to signify her fifty three years.

When she was finished, the cake in front of them more resembled a frosted minefield with candles to mark the bombs than an actual cake even more so when they lit the candles but nobody seemed to mind, so Severus shrugged it off as another oddity he found endearing like Hermione's father himself.

A spirited round of "Happy Birthday" followed, in which Stephen actually joined in and sang to himself "Happy Birthday, dear Stephen!"

Severus grimaced when he blew out all thirty-one candles in one breath and quite obviously blew bits of spittle all over the cake. Well, it appeared he'd been eating his slice sans frosting...

After everyone had had their fill of cake, Stephen led the way into the parlor where he opened a bottle of champagne. Severus took a goblet from Maureen as she handed one to each of them and noticed from the smile on her face that she had apparently warmed up to him somewhere between his stuttered response to her invasive question and the last bite of cake.

They all settled into the furniture as they drank, Maureen and Stephen on the sofa and Severus and Hermione on the loveseat.

Severus listened to the anecdotes and jokes shared and felt more at ease than he ever could have imagined he'd be in this situation. So at ease, in fact, that when

Hermione shifted closer and leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder, he didn't give it a second thought as he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against him securely, taking her hand in his and rubbing his thumb over her palm gently.

The champagne kept coming, and soon they were all a bit more *relaxed* than was probably wise.

"Hermione," her mother said after several hours, "does'nit bother you a bit that Severus is so much older th'n you?" She had apparently forgotten the No Relationship Questions rule, and Severus wasn't sure he liked where this was going, but Hermione surprised him with her answer.

"No, Mum, it doesn't. I've wanted Severus for a long time. I've never cared how old he is."

She had?

She'd wanted him? For how long?

"Even when you were 'is student?"

Severus was suddenly very interested in the answer to that question and no longer cared that it was an off limits topic.

But Hermione gave no answer. "I think it's time for Severus and I to be going," she said quietly, extracting herself from her position. Maureen and Stephen both looked disappointed for obviously different reasons. "Mum," Hermione said, "I asked you not to ask any more questions about my relationship with Severus. It's not something I intend on discussing with you. You can owl me whenever you feel ready to apologize for making us both uncomfortable. Dad, Happy Birthday. I'm glad I got to see you both. Severus, let's go."

Severus was standing now, ready to follow Hermione out.

"Good to meet you, Severus," Stephen said as they moved toward the door. "Delightful fellow."

"Likewise, Stephen," he said, and he meant it. He closed the door behind him and walked out onto the porch to find Hermione staring hard at the ground.

"So?" he asked, coming to stand in front of her.

"So what?"

"Did you want me when you were my student?" he asked quietly.

She froze and began to back away, but he caught her hands. She stared back at the ground, and he tilted her chin up.

"Tell me. You said you wanted me to notice you. You said you had a crush on me. Did you want me even back then?"

"No," she said. "It was... after that."

"When? I thought it was just this year since you'd been back."

She shook her head, wishing she were anywhere else. She really didn't want to admit how long she'd carried a pathetic torch for Severus before finally doing something about it. What if he thought she was... She swallowed thickly.

"How long?" he pressed.

She closed her eyes tightly and said, "Since we worked together in the war."

Severus was shocked. That had been right after she'd graduated. She'd been harboring feelings for him all this time?

"Tell me," he said.

She scoffed self-depreciatively. "There's nothing to tell. I was a pathetic little girl with a crush on her brave, noble professor. I went to university and thought I'd get over it, but when I came back this year, my feelings were still there. I wanted you to notice me and treat me as an equal, so I showed you respect and was polite to you. Then I realized that you would never notice me unless something changed, so I changed it. The rest you know..."

She looked away from him. "And now you know how silly... how stupid I've been."

"What?" He was confused. He didn't think she was stupid. He was elated that she'd felt so strongly for him that she'd done something to get him to notice her. He was glad she had. If she hadn't, he never would have realized what her presence in his life meant to him. He never would have gone to the extreme of inventing that project, never would have kissed her, never would have experienced jealous possessiveness for the first time or the joy that came with knowing he had nothing to worry about, never would have fallen in love with her.

He sucked in a breath. God. He loved her. He'd known it before now, deep down, but the words had never come to him before. And he knew it was true. He'd fallen in love with her. And, Merlin, it had been so easy. He'd opened the floodgates with that first kiss, and before he'd known what was happening to him, he'd been utterly swept away.

What should he do now? Should he tell her? How could he be sure she loved him back? What if she didn't? She'd said she'd wanted him, but she hadn't said she'd loved him, that she loved him now.

"Severus?" she said, wondering with growing anxiety why he hadn't said anything, why he was just staring at her like that. "Say something, will you?"

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, and he closed it again.

Hermione was feeling close to tears again, and it was her own fault. Why hadn't she just kept her mouth shut when her mother had asked her again about Severus? Damn champagne... Of course he wouldn't know what to say. She'd just admitted she'd practically been obsessed with him for years, and he was probably scared to death. They'd only been together for a couple of week. He couldn't have been ready for that kind of revelation. Her embarrassment overtook her.

"Oh, God," she blurted out. "You must think I'm some sort of... of stalker. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. Please, just forget I said all that."

"What? Stalker... No, Hermione."

"I didn't mean to say it. I don't want to scare you off. Just forget I said it, please, Severus."

"Scare me off, how could you scare me off?"

"I just admitted that I... Of course it would scare you off. I knew better than to put something like that on you when this was still so new. I know you're not ready for that. Can't we just forget this happened?"

"Hermione, do you think the depth of your feelings, whatever they are, would scare me away?"

"Don't they?"

"No, of course not. You admitting to me that you've had feelings for me for all this time doesn't scare me, and I don't think you are stupid. I think you're wonderful. I'm glad you told me." He finished by brushing the pad of his thumb across her cheek.

She was afraid to ask, but she needed to know. "Severus, how do you feel about me?"

"I..." He loved her. It was so easy to feel it. Why was it so hard to say it? "I care for you very much," he finally said, hoping it would be enough to convey the truth.

"I see." That was good. She knew it was good. It was a big step for him and more than she'd thought possible. It was a bit... disheartening, but there was still time ahead of them. She could wait for him, she thought, but right now, she needed to get home and get some sleep before she made things worse or embarrassed herself even further. Maybe tomorrow it would all look different.

She smiled at him tiredly and said, "I need to go home, Severus. It's been a long day." He nodded as she leaned forward and pecked him on the mouth.

Severus looked at her worriedly. He couldn't help but feel he should have told her he loved her. But she *did* seem tired, and it had been a long day. Maybe they both just needed to get some sleep. "All right," he said. "Ready?"

She took his hand, and they walked down the street to the place they'd appeared so many hours ago. Both were very quiet, Hermione thinking about everything that had happened between them and Severus thinking more and more as the seconds ticked by that he should say something, tell her the truth.

They reached the corner, and Severus pulled him against her to Disapparate, feeling comforted by her warmth and closeness. When they arrived before the gates of Hogwarts, he was a little reluctant to let her go. He decided to break the silence.

"Thank you for inviting me, Hermione."

Hermione chuckled. "Am I right in assuming you enjoyed my father?"

He smirked. "Very. He is not at all what I expected. You are very lucky to have been raised by such a man. I enjoyed the whole evening."

Hermione beamed at him, feeling her heart lighten considerably.

"Thank you..." he said quietly, "for protecting my privacy"

"Our privacy," she interjected.

His mouth twitched in amusement. "Our privacy," he agreed. "I'm finding myself in the midst of new experiences constantly these days, and having someone coming to my defense is something new. I appreciate it very much."

She smiled and hugged him. "Let's get inside. It's too cold out here."

They made their way up to the castle and then to Hermione's chambers. She felt happy now, content. Maybe it was the alcohol and his closeness that had done it, or maybe it was his admittance of how much he had liked her father, but she knew that he wasn't going anywhere. She could wait for him to catch up to her. "As long as we're thanking each other," she said, warmth in her voice, "I want to thank you for telling me that you care for me. I mean I knew you did, but it was nice to hear it."

Severus bit his lip and shifted uncomfortably. Here was another perfect opportunity to set her straight. She didn't seem to need it, but he'd realized after that first misunderstanding that they should have nothing but the truth between them, always, whatever it was.

But in his deliberation, the moment passed, and Hermione yawned. "All right. Goodnight, Severus. I'll see you in the morning?"

He nodded wordlessly, and she leaned forward for one last kiss. He gave it, and she retreated back into her chambers with a smile that he couldn't help but return.

As he walked the way back to his own quarters, he mentally kicked himself for his silence. Why he hadn't just told her? He'd wanted to. He knew why... It was because he'd never told a woman that he loved her before. He'd never *loved* a woman before, not like this. And risky as it felt, he wanted her to know. Even if she didn't need to hear it, he wanted her to know. He promised himself as he entered his quarters and readied for bed that he'd tell her the next time he saw her, no matter what.

ababababab

Hermione woke up with a hangover, which surprised her. She'd known she'd had quite a bit to drink, but it hadn't been so much that her speech had been slurred or her judgment impaired. So the pounding in her head and the ache in her muscles caught her off guard. She groaned as she looked at the clock. Damn. She'd missed breakfast, and she needed to take a shower. She had a class to teach in half an hour.

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Severus was worried when Hermione didn't show up for breakfast. His plan to tell her he loved her was more resolute than ever, but he couldn't tell her if she wasn't there. He worried more and more as the meal went on and she still didn't come. Was she all right? She'd said she'd "see him in the morning," so why wasn't she here?

He was a little worried that maybe after a good night's sleep, she'd changed her mind about their relationship, yet that didn't seem likely. As the meal went on and she didn't show, his worry turned into true fear that there was something wrong. The bell rang, and Severus was afraid now that something had happened. Was she sick? Or hurt? He took a detour and walked by her classroom. She should be there by now. He was immensely relieved as he stood outside her door and saw her bent over her desk, scribbling something as her students filed in. He wondered why she hadn't come to breakfast. He cleared his throat loudly enough for just her to hear and watched as she looked around for the source of the noise, startled. Her gaze came to rest on him, and she smiled.

Severus noticed that she looked tired, and her eyes were a bit puffy. If she was smiling at him like that, that meant her feelings hadn't changed. So why...? Ah. Hangover. It hadn't occurred to him until now that she weighed considerably less than he did and that she'd had just as much to drink the night before.

He gave her a nod and left for his own class, which would start without him if he didn't hurry. As soon as he was able, he summoned a house-elf and had him deliver a vial of hangover relief potion to Hermione.

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Lunchtime arrived, and Severus was ready, once again, to find Hermione and tell her the truth. He arrived in the Great Hall, and his heart jumped with excitement and nervousness when he saw her seated in her usual chair. He took a deep breath and made his way toward her, rehearsing in his head what he was going to say.

He sat down next to her and touched her arm.

"Severus," she said brightly. She looked a lot better than she had in the morning. The hangover relief potion had done its job then.

"Thank you for the potion. Saved my morning."

He nodded shortly, not wanting to be sidetracked. "Hermione," he said, "I need to tell you something."



She looked at him in surprise at the seriousness of his tone. "Oh," she said, biting her lip a bit. "Is everything okay?" Her eyes searched his eyes for a sign of what he was thinking.

"Everything is fine. There's just something you need to know."

She held his gaze, giving him her undivided attention, not knowing what to expect.

"Last night, when you asked"

"Severus," called Albus Dumbledore as he approached, and Severus gritted his teeth. What could the old fool want? And of all the worst possible times to interrupt a conversation...

"Hermione, last" he tried to go on but was cut off by an old, wrinkled hand on his shoulder and the Headmaster's voice ruining his speech again.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, "I hope you're ready for tomorrow night. Everything is set, but I still need your signature on the contract.

"What are you talking about?" Severus hissed. Did he have to pick *this* moment to come over and start talking nonsense?

"Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. Surely you haven't forgotten about the Bachelor Auction?"

Severus cursed loudly and clenched his eyes shut, barely holding himself back from shouting at the Headmaster. "As I matter of fact," he ground out, "I had forgotten. As much as I appreciate you reminding me, I can't discuss this right now."

"I'm afraid now is the time, my boy. I need you to accompany me to my office. This is the only time a representative from the Planning Committee has free before the event, and you are the last bachelor we need to sign."

"Just give me a few minutes, and I'll be there."

"I'm afraid I can't wait a few minutes, Severus. The Committee is on a tight schedule."

"Fine," he snapped, pushing his chair out and sanding up violently, glaring at Dumbledore.

The old man just smiled back and walked away from the table. Severus looked at Hermione and said, "It's important. I'll come to your chambers after classes."

She nodded, and he swept out of the room, following the Headmaster.

Once in the corridor, he caught up to Dumbledore as they walked. "Aside from that fact that you couldn't have timed this little meeting any worse, I'm afraid it's unnecessary, as I will not be participating in this *Bachelor Auction*."

"Oh, and why is that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Because, Headmaster, I am no longer a bachelor; therefore, I am not eligible to be auctioned off as one."

"I wasn't aware that you'd gotten married since last we spoke," Dumbledore said with a chuckle.

"You know perfectly well that I am not married," Severus snapped.

"Then you are still a bachelor."

"No, I'm not!" Severus was beginning to lose his temper. "I'm seeing someone, and I'm not about to go auction myself off as a single man to some desperate woman while I'm involved with another!"

"Come now, Severus. I'm sure Miss Granger will understand that this is just for charity."

"Miss I You How?"

"How did I know you've been seeing Miss Granger? Give me a little credit, Severus. I may be old, but I'm not blind."

Severus glared as they reached Dumbledore's office. "Fine. It doesn't matter how you know," he spat. "The point is that refuse to take part in this. That is final, Headmaster."

Ten minutes later, not only had Severus signed the contract, but by doing so he had committed his time from now until the auction for any preparations that Dumbledore or the Planning Committee felt he needed to be a part of.

When Dumbledore informed him that his classes had been cancelled for the rest of the day and for tomorrow and that he was needed for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening in Hogsmeade for a robe fitting, he thought the whole world was conspiring against him.

"I *can't* go to Hogsmeade, Headmaster," he said in a low, controlled voice. "I told Hermione I'd be at her quarters as soon as classes are finished. It is very important that I not miss the appointment."

"I'm sure Miss Granger will understand if you explain the situation to her," Dumbledore replied dismissively.

Severus gritted his teeth again. "Albus!" he snapped, and the Headmaster immediately paid attention, knowing that the times Severus called him by his given name were few and far between. "I have agreed to this willingly, if you can call it that, getting nothing in return for myself. I am telling you I need some time to talk to Hermione this afternoon, so give me that time. You cannot tell me that I will be needed every second from now until the auction."

Dumbledore gave him a long look, meeting his eyes honestly and for once without that damn twinkle. "All right," he finally said. "You've signed the contract now, so I'm afraid you're magically bound to the auction and the commitments it entails, including the ones this afternoon, but I will give you time to go to her, as long as you can come directly to Hogsmeade after. That will have to be good enough."

Severus nodded shortly.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I have to be honest with you, Severus. The reason I asked you to be a part of this in the first place was that I had hoped it would give Miss Granger an opportunity to make her feelings known to you. But I must say I was ever so pleased for you both when you found each other on your own without my meddling."

"Then why did you insist today that I still be a part of it?" he asked.

"Because I thought Miss Granger would bid for you anyway, and Severus, I truly thought you would enjoy yourself. You still might."

Severus grumbled something, thinking having a good time was not likely. Maybe he could get Hermione to bid for him. That would take care of a lot of problems this could cause. His thoughts turned to her again, and he began mentally rehearsing the speech he would make, but his thoughts came to a halt as something else struck him.

"Headmaster," he said suspiciously with narrowed eyes, "you told me I'd be allowed to wear whatever I wanted. Why am I needed in Hogsmeade for a *fitting*?"

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**SB's Notes:** Right then. I hope you liked the dinner with the parents. I really did have a blast writing it. (Could be because it was four in the morning, and I'd been up for twenty-two hours) Only one more chapter to go! Auction's up next...

## Sold and Satisfied

Chapter 6 of 6

The auction has finally arrived! Severus has something important to tell Hermione. How will she react, and where will it lead them? And what will the auction mean for their relationship?

*Disclaimer: I'm not J.K. Rowling. Wait... Lemme check... nope. Still just me.*

Thanks go to the wonderful Southern\_Witch\_69 for simply rocking my socks. And for beta reading, of course.

**SB's Notes:** So here it finally is and three thousand words longer than I'd originally written. That's why this chapter took longer to post than the others. I did some adding and rewriting to make this as sexy and fun as it is. Hopefully it's worth the wait!

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### Sold and Satisfied

Hermione went through the remainder of her day filled with curiosity. She didn't know what Severus was going to say to her, but she hoped it was something good.

And this Bachelor Auction... how was it possible she hadn't known about it? Had she been so caught up in everything with Severus that she hadn't heard about it? Had there been flyers up that she just hadn't noticed? And why hadn't Severus mentioned it? Maybe he'd just forgotten about it in the midst of everything... That was possible.

One thing was for sure; she didn't like the idea of some other woman bidding for and winning a date with him. Quite a few questions ran through her mind. She'd just have to ask him about it. She gave a sigh and focused on her teaching, knowing there was no point in dwelling on it until she'd heard whatever Severus was going to tell her.

A few hours later, she was fidgeting around her quarters restlessly, waiting for him to arrive. When he knocked on her door, she opened it almost immediately.

"Hello," she said a bit worriedly.

"May I come in?" he asked, an inscrutable expression in his eyes.

She nodded and stepped aside. He came in and turned to her, looking a bit nervous himself, which made her all the more nervous, wondering what had him uneasy.

She swallowed, just wanting everything to be in the open. "What is it you wanted to tell me, Severus?"

"Well, perhaps we should sit down."

"Please, whatever it is, just tell me," she said.

He paused for a moment, looking deep into her eyes, then nodded. "Hermione, last night, when you asked me how I felt about you, I wasn't honest. I am... unpracticed when it comes to being open about my emotions, and your question caught me off guard. I told you that I care for you very much, and that was not an honest answer."

Hermione stilled completely, her breath caught in her chest.

"I don't just care for you. I..." He took a step closer. With an earnest expression, he said, "Hermione, I'm in love with you. I love you."

Hermione just stood there, her eyes wide.

"I should have told you when you asked me last night, and I was afraid I had hurt you when I didn't. I wanted to tell you. It was just that this has all happened so fast, and I am, once again, out of my depth. I've never... felt this way before. I wanted to say it when you asked me, but I couldn't."

Hermione finally cleared her throat. "Are you sure...?" she began hoarsely.

"That I'm in love with you?" he asked. "Yes, I am."

"Oh."

He began to look a bit uncomfortable again. "We said we'd be honest with one another, and I wasn't. Will you give me another chance? Can we... start over?"

The sight of Severus Snape looking so unsure and vulnerable suddenly made this all very real to Hermione. She couldn't help but smile and chuckle a bit as a wave of realization at what he'd just said swept over her, as well as the awareness that he was just as insecure about all this as she was. She couldn't have been happier. Her relief was tangible.

"There's no need to start over, Severus. I wouldn't give up the time we've had together, been together, for anything. Thank you for telling me the truth."

He relaxed, and she stepped forward so that he could wrap his arms around her. He did, and she smiled into his shoulder as he rested his chin against her neck and rubbed her back.

Inside, he felt his chest tighten. He'd told her he loved her, and she hadn't thrown it back in his face. She hadn't returned the words, but she didn't have to. It was quite clear from last night that she felt the way he did. She'd tell him when she was ready; he was sure.

They stood there like that for quite a while, each feeling relief and contentment. "Now, about this Bachelor Auction," Severus finally said.

Hermione leaned back a bit so she could look at him. "Yes, about that. Is there any particular reason why you didn't mention it?"

He shook his head. "I honestly forgot about it with... everything."

"Are you still going to be in it? Even though you're not... a bachelor?"

"Unfortunately I don't have a choice," he sighed. "I've already agreed to it and signed a magically binding contract. The Headmaster insists that I am a bachelor, as I am not married."

"Ah," Hermione said. "Well, I suppose you'll just have to go through with it then."

"Hermione, please believe that I have no desire to... If there were a way out of this, I'd take it."

"I know. It's all right. Once you've signed a contract, there is no way out. You'll just have to fulfill the terms."

He cringed. The last thing he wanted was to spend an evening with some woman when Hermione was somewhere waiting for him. Then his previous idea came to him again. "You know, you could bid for me," he said quietly.

"Wouldn't that sort of defeat the purpose of the auction?"

"Why would it?"

"Well, I mean, the objective of the whole thing is to raise as much money as possible for the school, I assume," she said.

He nodded.

"Nobody's going to bother to bid for you if they know your girlfriend is determined to win. Why would they? It would be a waste of time. I'd get you for practically free, and then where would the school be?"

"I don't care where the school would be," he grouched. "I don't want to be *purchased* by some desperate woman."

Hermione chuckled. "But I don't want to spend money to win you when I already have you."

He looked pained. "Hermione..." He dropped all pretense of dignity. "I'll pay."

"What?"

"I'll pay forme. Whatever it costs. Just don't let someone else win."

Hermione laughed. "I don't know, Severus," she said, deciding to tease him a bit. "I don't see what the big problem is. I'll admit that when I thought about it earlier, the idea of you with some other woman bothered me, but that was because I was so unsure about how you felt towards me. Now I know I have nothing to worry about."

He grunted something irritably. "So you're saying you won't bid for me, even if I pay?"

She chuckled again. "I'll think about it, Severus, but it won't be the end of the world if I don't. You'll have me when it's over. One evening out to dinner with another woman won't change anything between us."

He sighed and closed his eyes in resignation, and she took that opportunity to lean forward and kiss him. He was surprised only for a moment before he returned with fervor, the auction all but forgotten as he tasted her warmth.

He felt his whole body sigh as Hermione sucked gently on his lower lip, and he tightened his hold on her. He'd missed this. It had only been a day, but Merlin help him, he loved kissing her.

She ran her fingers through his hair, tucking several strands behind his ear, and pulled his forehead down to rest against hers. "Do you want to stay for dinner?" she asked, running her fingers up and down his arms in a way that almost made him shiver with pleasure. "We could have something light, then have the whole evening to ourselves... getting *reacquainted*."

He groaned, already feeling the beginnings of an erection. "Yes, that sounds wonderful..." He tilted his head to kiss her again and cursed as he realized her wonderful idea was not going to be possible. "Damn it!"

Hermione pulled back. "What is it?" she asked, looking worried.

"I have to go to Hogsmeade for the evening."

"What? Why?"

"For a *fitting*," he almost spat. His distaste and frustration were evident as he went on. "A proviso of that contract is that I have to participate in any preparation for the event that the Headmaster or the Planning Committee deem necessary."

Hermione sighed and moved away, looking resigned and disappointed. "All right," she said.

Severus wanted to yank her back against him and pick up where they'd left off, but he knew he couldn't.

"Will you, *can* you, come back after?" she asked.

"I'll try," he said. "If it's not too late, I will."

"Severus, I don't care how late it is. I... I want to be with you," she said quietly. "After everything we've waited long enough."

Severus' mouth went dry. He opened it to agree whole-heartedly with her, but no sound came out. He closed it again and nodded, thinking that he'd do whatever it took to return to her after his fitting that they'd be shagging already if it wasn't for this blasted auction and making a mental note to hex Dumbledore at the first available opportunity.

He cleared his throat finally. "I must go. The Headmaster is waiting. I'll come back tonight."

She nodded and kissed him lingeringly. "I'll wait."

He gave her arm a squeeze and tore himself away from her, grumbling something as he went.

Once he was gone, Hermione took a seat on her sofa and smiled. He loved her. After so long of wanting him and loving him, of thinking he'd never think of her that way, he loved her. She felt very lucky.

And tonight, finally, they were going to be together. They'd wanted each other for weeks now well, she'd been wanting him, and if his obvious erection before he'd left was any indication, he'd been wanting her.

She wanted tonight to be perfect.

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Severus barely made it through his evening in Hogsmeade without cursing someone.

He'd arrived at Gladrags Wizardwear to find a shop full of bachelors of varying shapes, sizes, and ages, several members of the Planning Committee each carrying a clipboard and looking rather self-important...the staff of the shop, and Albus Dumbledore.

The Headmaster waved at Severus the moment he made it into the overcrowded shop. He motioned him over, and Severus pushed his way through a group of talkative wizards who apparently had less of a problem with being sold to the highest bidder than he did.

"Everything went well, I hope?" Dumbledore said as Severus reached his side.

"Yes," he grumbled, "well enough."

Dumbledore beamed. "I'm glad to hear that, Severus. The two of you deserve to be happy."

"I don't suppose you'd reverse the contract by way of congratulations..."

Dumbledore just gave him an indulgent pat on the back and called over the nearest tailor. Soon, Severus was lost in a sea of tape measures and hurried Committee members who wouldn't have given a moment's notice to his protests had he chosen to voice them. But he hadn't. By this time he'd given in. Even the glare he gave the tailor who made him spread his feet and measured his inseam was half-hearted.

By the time he'd been fitted and sent on his way with instructions to come back for his new robes at ten the next morning, it was late in the evening. He was about to leave, thinking he couldn't get to Hermione soon enough, but the Headmaster signaled him over and told him that they'd all be heading to the Three Broomsticks for drinks, where they'd be given more information about what exactly they'd have to do in the auction.

Severus groaned, but made his way to the pub.

Once through the door, he was spotted immediately. "Severus!" Remus Lupin called, motioning him over. "Have a drink with us!"

Severus looked around Lupin's table to see whom the man meant by *us* and groaned again. He scanned the room for another place to sit, but it seemed every other booth and table was full. It appeared he'd be enduring the company of Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Neville Longbottom instead of returning to the castle and salvaging what was left of the evening in Hermione's arms.

"Severus," Lupin said as Severus took a seat, "I was just telling these gentlemen how surprised I was to find out you'd be participating in the auction.

Severus felt his body tense in alarm as he took in Lupin's accusatory smirk. That bastard had better not out his relationship with Hermione. His lips thinned as he said, "And why would that be, Lupin?"

Weasley laughed and elbowed Potter. "Yeah, I was wondering that myself. Not much point in being up there when no one's going to bid for you, right, Harry?"

Severus scowled. Weasley obviously hadn't followed where Lupin was going, but his jabs were unwelcome nonetheless. "Listen, Weasley. I had no desire to be a part of this, but you can be sure I"

"Will your, ah, *girlfriend* be bidding for you then?" Lupin asked.

Severus turned a contemptuous glare to him, and Lupin only smirked again.

"Girlfriend?" Potter asked with a raised eyebrow.

"He has a *girlfriend*?" Weasley echoed. Then after a long, unflattering pause "Who'd go out with *him*?"

*If you only knew, Weasley.* Severus came very close to informing them both exactly who was more than willing to go out with him, but he took another look at the smug expression on Lupin's face and realized that was exactly what the bastard wanted.

*Nice try, werewolf.* Instead, Severus smirked. "For your information, Lupin," he said smoothly, "I brought that very concern to the Headmaster. He insisted that as I am not married, I am still technically a bachelor. I'm afraid I have no choice but to participate, much as I would rather not."

"You're serious?" Potter said with his eyes wide. "He's actually *dating* a woman?"

Severus' patience was wearing thin.

"Well," Remus said, "I'm not sure that much *dating* actually goes on, but yes, he's seeing someone."

"Who?" asked a gaping Weasley.

Severus' nostrils flared at Lupin's comment. Hermione had told him that Lupin had overheard their scene at breakfast that morning two weeks ago. He'd wondered about how long they should go on keeping their relationship private when it was bound to get out the moment Lupin saw that there was nothing in it for him to keep it quiet. They had tacitly decided that it was best to wait to notify the public until they were secure enough together for the scorn they would meet not to bother them, but at this point, it didn't matter.

There was no way in hell he was going to sit here and let that bastard demean what he had with Hermione. He glared right at him with disdain, ignoring the other occupants of the table as he hissed, "How dare you cheapen my relationship with her? You know nothing about it."

Lupin glared back. "I know what I heard at the breakfast table, Snape, and I know that the two of you spend almost every night together, yet neither of you has openly acknowledged your relationship. Now why would that be?"

Severus wanted to break the man's neck. "Listen, Lupin," he said dangerously, "if you ever make her feel ashamed of this, something you have no understanding of, make no mistake, I'll take it personally."

"Don't worry, Severus! I have no desire to hurt her. You, on the other hand can't figure out what you want with her, other than the obvious."

Severus swelled with loathing. "She means more to me than you could ever know, you bastard."

"Right. If she means so much to you, explain why her best friends don't even know you're together."

"I don't owe you an explanation. When we're ready to tell her friends, they'll know, and nothing they or anyone else has to say about it will matter to us."

Severus glared around at the friends in question and noted that they'd been following every word with fascination.

"So who is it?" Potter asked Lupin.

"Yeah, who's he shagging?" Weasley pressed eagerly.

"Weasley!" Severus roared, but was cut off from giving the redhead hell for referring to Hermione so disgustingly when Dumbledore's voice rose above the chatter in the room.

"Good Evening, gentlemen!" he said. "I, on behalf of Hogwarts and the Planning Committee for the event, would once again like to thank you all for agreeing to give up your time to be a part of this."

Several cheers rang through the pub, telling Severus that many of the men were desperate enough not to be bothered by the whole idea or too drunk to care.

Dumbledore smiled. "I shall now tell you all how the auction will go tomorrow. You are all to pick up your new robes from Gladrags tomorrow at your scheduled times. The Committee has asked me to have you all in the Great Hall, dressed and ready, by 5:30 tomorrow evening. The dinner will begin at six and will end at seven. At that time, you must all go to the room that we'll have sectioned off for you on the side of the stage to wait while your fellow bachelors are being auctioned. There will be a list there of the order in which you'll be bid for.

"When your name is announced, you will take your place on the stage and give your best gentlemanly smiles while the lovely ladies in attendance bid for you."

Lovely ladies indeed, Severus thought with a roll of his eyes.

"Now, when the auction is over, the lady who has purchased you will join you on the stage and inform you of how and when you will be spending your evening with her. Once she has, you will be free to go for the night. Thank you all, once again, for your participation, and I hope you enjoy yourselves!"

Severus took that moment to get up and leave as quickly as possible. He had no intention of hanging around to continue the insulting conversation with the other men. Hermione was waiting for him, and he could think of nothing that he wanted more than to be with her just then, to feel her and know that what they had was real.

And he could only pray that she'd find it in her heart to bid for him.

As he made his way back to Hogwarts, first by Apparition and then by foot once he'd reached the gates, he found himself smiling. Despite the irritation of the auction and its other *participants*, Severus couldn't hold on to his negative feelings for long with the thoughts of Hermione and what they were finally going to do enveloping his consciousness.

The closer he got to her door, the more vivid his imagination became, and therefore, the harder his cock and the quicker his steps. He thought about what she might be wearing, how she would smell, taste, the smile she would give him. Had she been thinking about it like he had?

He took a deep breath and knocked on her door softly, restraining himself from leaning forward and pressing his ear to the door to hear what she was doing.

After a pause, which he filled by quickly adjusting his robes so that his erection was less obvious, Hermione opened the door, and Severus sucked in a breath.

She was wearing a chiffon nightgown in a cream color that was nothing special but for the fact that it was nearly sheer enough to leave nothing to the imagination. Severus couldn't help but look around jealously as he stepped into her sitting room to make sure no one else had caught a glimpse of what was for him.

He looked at her again once the door was safely closed behind him, this time with hunger. He almost let out a growl as he took her in and noticed that he could see outlines of her nipples through her gown. He took an involuntary step closer to her, and she took a step back, giving him the smile he'd imagined on his way here.

He raised his eyebrows as he met her gaze. So, she wanted to play games, did she?

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

Actually, he was, but his stomach wasn't the most pressing of matters at the moment.

"Hermione," he said in a low voice, "the food can wait." He took another step towards her, and this time she didn't back away. His fingers wrapped around her arms, and he pulled her closer, leaning his head down to take in her scent. Yes, just as he'd imagined sweet, a bit tangy, *her*.

He couldn't resist; his tongue darted out to taste the smooth skin where her shoulder met her neck. She shivered against him so slightly he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been paying such close attention. He pulled back enough to look at her and found her eyes closed. He released his hold on her arms, and she wrapped them reflexively around his neck, leaning into him.

He dragged his fingers down her sides, enjoying the feel of the fabric and the way it slid against the skin underneath. His hands finally came to rest on her hips, his fingertips curving around to rest on her bum.

"Hermione," he said a bit hoarsely, close to sensory overload. Her eyes flickered open, and she smiled again, leaning forward to press soft, open kisses to the small expanse of pale skin visible above the high collar of his robes. He tilted his head back to give her better access, tightening his grip on her arse and bunching the fabric in his fists.

He pulled her against his groin, trying to relieve some of the pressure in his cock, which had long since escaped the waistband he'd quickly tried to tuck it into back in the corridor. It was now pressing into her abdomen, hard and insistent, and she gave him what he needed, shifting her hips from side to side, rubbing against him. He groaned, tilting his head down to finally capture her eager mouth.

She moaned into his mouth as his tongue darted past her lips, and Severus thought it was the sweetest sound. It hit him then that this was really going to happen. She was here, and he was here. They wanted each other, and there was nothing to stop them. Knowing that made it a bit easier not to rush.

He released his grip on her backside and took her hand instead. "The bedroom?"

She nodded with a soft smile and led him to her bedroom. Once through the door, Severus looked around and was not surprised to find that this room was very much like his own but for the coloring. Where he had earth tones browns and greens to color his living space, she had deep blues and off-whites.

His appraisal of her decorating preferences, though, was lackadaisical at best. He was far more interested in the woman in front of him.

She looked at him a bit nervously, but still with a smile. "So," she said, "I wanted this to be perfect, but I wasn't sure how to make it so. This isn't really my area of expertise love making."

A thought occurred to Severus, and his eyes widened. "You're not... a... you're not a"

"Virgin? No, I'm not. But I'm not very experienced, I'm afraid. Not very practiced in setting up a sensual experience. I didn't know if candles or music would be appropriate, so I just decided the nightgown and my own charms would have to be enough."

She gave him a sly smile, and Severus smirked, glad that she hadn't had the necessary experience to make her an expert.

"But," she went on, "I do want this to special, good for both of us." As she said it, her voice lowered, and she slowly slid the straps of her gown off her shoulders, backing toward the bed. "I may not know much about seduction, but I think I can figure it out as I go along."

Severus made a hoarse noise, more aroused by this simple sight than was probably reasonable. For someone as inexperienced as she was, he thought, she sure knew how to push all the right buttons. His appreciation of her sensual show came to a crescendo as she made a shimmying motion and all in one movement, her gown slid down her body to pile on the floor, suddenly leaving her in nothing but a skimpy, cream-colored pair of knickers.

Severus' mouth watered as he looked her over, frozen where he stood. "Good God, Hermione," he said in a choked voice.

She just smiled at him. "As I said, I'm not very experienced, but I have a feeling that I know what you like, what you want. Do you like it when I do this?" She moved her hands to her skin and cupped her breasts, blushing a bit as she ran her fingers over her nipples.

Severus could only stare, thought deserting him.

"That's what I thought," she said. He stood transfixed as she turned around, her back to him, and his breath, again, froze in his chest as he stared at her bare arse and the tiny scrap of fabric that was the back of her knickers.

His cock was trying to punch a hole in his pants, and it became rather obvious to him as she bent over the bed provocatively to climb onto it that he was quite overdressed. He spelled the laces on his boots loose and kicked them off, his socks going with them. He made short work of his robes, unbuttoning the collar and simply pulling the whole thing up and over his head. He thanked himself for not having worn anything but his cotton pants underneath, all the while watching Hermione's shapely arse as she crawled up the bed.

When she turned around, she let out a gasp of surprise at his state of undress, which quickly turned to appreciation as her eyes scanned his body, finally coming to rest on his blatantly tented shorts. She smirked and met his eyes as she leaned back against the headboard. "Looks like I'm doing something right."

Severus still had no words. He moved forward in a daze, prowling his way up the bed to kneel on all fours over her, and she giggled as he bent his head to nip at her naked breasts.

His lean muscles felt good under her fingers, and she loved the way his body tensed up in arousal as she touched him.

He tongued her nipple gently, and she let out a low moan, holding his head in her hands. She pulled him up for a kiss, threading her fingers through his hair for a moment before scooting her body down underneath him and trailing her fingers down his torso until she reached the waistband of his cotton shorts.

"Hermione," he managed to say as she dragged them over his hips. He helped her by kicking them off, and she took her first look at his completely naked body... and liked what she saw. Her eyes took him in hungrily, her fingers following her gaze wherever it roamed on his body, until both her stare and fingers found his straining cock.

His body tensed again as she stroked him the way she knew he liked. "Severus?"

He grunted in response, his eyes rolling back in his head and his arms and legs barely holding his weight. She made a noise that suggested both amusement and arousal, and he opened his eyes to look her over again. She still had her knickers on, but that was a problem he would shortly remedy.

He leaned back on his haunches, his cock slipping out of her grasp. He felt the loss of contact sharply, and it made him hurry all the more to loop his thumbs under the band of her knickers and pull. "Up," he said.

She arched her hips off the bed long enough for him to get her underwear off her and toss them behind him somewhere. He was finally staring at her in all her glory, and glorious she was. And she was beneath him, ready for him. She was *for him*.

He couldn't help but be a little in awe of this lovely creature who wanted him. Hermione... He spread her legs and knelt between them, scooting closer to her until his cock rested against her center. He pulled her up against him and latched his mouth onto hers, wanting to be as close to her as possible in this moment, unable to get enough of her, even though he was about to have *all* of her.

She returned his kiss, her breathing and heart rate speeding up to match his as he rubbed his groin against hers. It wasn't enough; she needed more. She reached between them again and grasped his shaft, moving it a bit so that its head rested against her throbbing clit. She leaned her head back and moaned as the first electric shock pulsed through her.

Severus held his breath as she used his cock to rub tiny circles against her pleasure button. Great Merlin... she was using him to bring herself off. "Oh, God..." he groaned as his cock twitched. The thought that a woman, *Hermione*, was using his penis to masturbate was damn near the most erotic thing he could conceive of.

He wanted to be inside her, but this was good, tooher hand sliding up and down his shaft as she ground herself against him, her little fingers squeezing with just the right amount of pressure. She was moaning and gasping now, and he couldn't help but thrust in time with her, his eyes glued to where his cock met her tiny, pink clit.

He could tell she was going to come soon, and he wanted her to finish partly because he loved to watch her orgasm and partly because he didn't know how long he was going to last once he was inside her. She didn't disappoint him. Her moans became harsh breaths sucked in desperately as she reached for the edge; her face twisted as if in agony, and her mouth dropped open.

Severus watched her sex in fascination as he felt it pulse hard against his cock, flushed in an even deeper pink as it swelled. And then she cried out brokenly as she came, her hand squeezing him almost tightly enough to hurt as she rubbed as hard as she could, trying to get as much pleasure as was possible. Severus thought she was the most magnificent thing he'd ever seen, and the way she chanted his name as she released his shaft and fell back onto the bed was almost enough to push him over the edge with her.

He couldn't help himself as he spread her legs wide, pushed her knees high, positioned himself at her entrance, and sunk into heaven.

"Fuck..." he moaned, clenching himself to keep from coming. He held himself perfectly still inside her, afraid to even breathe, until the urge to ejaculate passed. He opened his eyes again, and his heart thudded hard in his chest at the way she was smiling at him.

"You look perfect like that," she whispered, and he couldn't agree more. To him, she looked perfectnaked, flushed, and *his*.

He leaned forward and gave her a wet and slightly messy, but heartfelt, kiss as she wrapped her legs around his hips, anchoring him to her.

He released her mouth and rested his weight on his elbows and forearms, tucking his hands under her shoulders as she reached her arms around him.

His first stroke caught her perfectly, and she sucked in a breath.

He thrust again, this time deeper. "Good?" he asked, barely keeping a hold on reality.

"Yesss," she hissed, and they quickly found a rhythm.

His strokes were measured, coming in a controlled pace to keep him from losing it, but when she began crying out softly with every thrust and dragged her fingernails across his arse, his tightly controlled rhythm broke like a dam, and he let his passion take over. His desire to pace himself and draw out the experience melted in her heat until the overwhelming need to simply fuck her as hard as he could, to possess her and drown in her, remained.

He pounded into her over and over, gasping hard with each thrust. Gods, being inside her... this felt better than anything ever had. He could have been happy spending the rest of forever sliding in and out of her heat if he hadn't needed to come so badly.

Hermione watched in awe as droplets of sweat ran down his neck and fell onto her. The expression on his face was one of pure bliss, and she loved it that she was the one making him feel that way.

She was going to come against she could feel it. She had not thought she would be able to, but the reality of finally having him inside her was adding to the pleasure his thrusts were giving her, and she could feel it building. Just a little more...

"Oh, God, Severus... Don't stop... don't! I'm almost... there... again!!" And with that, she shattered beneath him and around him. Severus slowed down to a halt as she came gripping him like a vise.

"Hermione..." he moaned as her mouth fell open again, her face frozen and her eyes locked to his.

Her head finally fell back with a thud that would have hurt if they hadn't been on a bed, and she released a forceful breath as her body relaxed.

Severus couldn't have stopped himself if he'd wanted to. Her inner muscles were still fluttering deliciously as he quickly resumed his previous pace.

Hermione stared up at him, now aware enough to listen to the words he was muttering with his gasps.

"So... goodso... *fucking... good...*"

Hermione was amazed. She'd never seen a man so unrestrained, so ardent and this was Severus, *her* Severus.

"Uhn, Hermione, Mione, need to come, now... fuck!... need... a bit more..."

His muttering was mesmerizing to her, and she wanted to help him. He was almost there she could tell. She tightened herself around his shaft experimentally, and her eyes widened when he let out a roar and every muscle in his body locked above her. She felt warmth flood into her, proof that he'd come.

Severus thought he'd died and gone to heaven as his orgasm overtook him and his seed rushed into her, each pulse feeling like liquid fire as it flowed through his cock. He shuddered and moaned as he managed to give a final few, weak thrusts, then collapsed all his weight unceremoniously on top of Hermione with a heavy sigh.

Pleasant lethargy filled his limbs, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. Hermione held him close, not protesting his weight at all. She pressed kisses to his face, and he smiled exhaustedly.

That had been unbelievable, more than anything he had ever imagined, and he knew as he opened his eyes and looked into hers that he would never, ever let her go.

He regained enough strength to roll off her, get them under the covers, and spell the lights off wandlessly. He pulled her against him, reveling in everything they'd just experienced together. The words came to his lips, and he didn't stop them. It felt right to tell her.

"I love you," he murmured into her hair and felt her sigh, snuggling back against him.

He was asleep before he knew it.

abababababab

Severus awoke early the next morning; the presence of another human being beside him in bed was new and strange enough to have him alert the moment the first light of dawn flittered through the curtains.

It only took him a small moment to realize who was beside him and to remember what they'd shared only hours before. He closed his eyes again and tightened an arm around Hermione, more and more awake as each second passed, but wanting to enjoy every second of peace that he could before the day came crashing in.

He felt Hermione stirring next to him and turned his head to look at her.

"Mmm..." she murmured, instinctively cuddling up to his warmth. She finally opened her eyes and looked at him dazedly. "Hello, you."

Severus smirked and leaned in to kiss her good morning. Hermione grimaced and turned her face away, and Severus frowned, raising a questioning eyebrow. "My mouth tastes like hell, and I doubt yours is much better. Let's hold off on the kissing..."

She had a point. Severus yawned, and Hermione's point was proven. She giggled as she rolled away and made her way into the bathroom after a good stretch, which woke Severus' cock up effectively enough.

She disappeared into her bathroom, and Severus heard the toilet flush a minute or so later and the sound of running water as she turned on the faucet in her sink.

"Bring a toothbrush with you from now on" he heard her call, her voice muffled by the fact that she was obviously brushing her own teeth. "Or better yet, just get a second one to leave here."

She emerged from the bathroom and climbed back into bed with him. "Then we won't have this problem."

Severus looked at her pointedly, got up, grabbed his wand from his robes, and cast a *Scourgify* on his mouth.

Hermione's eyes widened. "You don't use a toothbrush?"

"Of course I use a toothbrush. But, as you've already pointed out, I haven't one with me, and I have no intention of not kissing you again before I leave."

Hermione's mouth opened and formed a silent 'Ah' of understanding, and then her gaze rested on his obvious morning erection. She met his eyes again with a smirk. "You, erm, need any help with that?" she asked. "I could"

She was cut short as Severus walked back to the bed and lunged for her. She squealed as his hands found her ticklish spots, and her glee turned smoothly to breathless arousal as his tickling became more purposeful.

A little over an hour and a quick breakfast in her sitting room later, they were both dressed and as ready for the day as they were going to be.

"Will I see you again before the tonight?" she asked as she gathered her teaching materials.

"Probably not," he admitted. "I doubt I'll be able to get away at all until it's all over. I most likely won't see you until the auction. You'll be there, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll be there. I can't promise I'll bid for you, though."

He bit his tongue to keep from begging. "Fair enough," he said in a voice he hoped was nonchalant.

"Good luck, Severus. And do try to enjoy yourself."

ababababab

They'd missed breakfast in the Great Hall, so Hermione went from her quarters straight to her classroom. She grinned as she walked. Last night had been fantastic, not to mention this morning. It had been everything she'd wanted and more. But then, she was so utterly in love with the man, how could it have been anything but fantastic?

He'd said it again that he loved her. She frowned slightly as she wondered if perhaps she should have told him she loved him, too. She'd been so caught up in the pleasure and peace of the moment, and so happy that he'd told her he loved her again, that she hadn't even been able to form words. He must have known it, though. He hadn't seemed to require she say something in return, but she knew it was always nice to hear the words.

And what to do about this auction... Should she bid for him? It seemed rather pointless, considering she didn't need to bid for him to spend an evening with him, as was evidenced by last night. If she showed up and made it clear that she was bidding, nobody else would try for him. But then, she reasoned, very few people knew she was seeing him, so maybe they'd bid anyway.

In truth, she didn't really want someone else to buy him in part for the simple reason that that would be one less evening she'd get to spend with him, but also because he was *hers*. Her desire to be with him was insisting she do whatever it took to make sure she outbid anyone else, but her sense of fair play was telling her to leave it alone and let the other women battle it out she was his girlfriend after all, and a lot of women would probably jump at the chance to bid for an evening with the elusive war hero who would never give them the time of day unless he was magically obligated to do so.

A vision of the horror on his face should some middle-aged, giggling witch in festive, pink robes win the auction made Hermione laugh, and it was then that she had a wicked idea.

She could have fun watching him squirm, make sure she won the auction, and return his admittance of love all in one go.

She was already forming a plan.

ababababab

As it turned out, Severus' only free moment before the auction came at a time when Hermione was busy teaching a class. After picking up his new robes, he'd stopped by the apothecary to pick up a shipment of ingredients. Thinking he might as well get it done then, he'd gone to his solicitor's office to work out the details of selling the Deciphering Draught. By that time, lunch at Hogwarts had been long since over, and his opportunity to see Hermione had passed.

Severus stopped outside her classroom door on his way back from Hogsmeade to at least get a look at her. When she saw him standing there, she gave him an affectionate smile that warmed him before a student asked her a question and the moment was over.

He went back to his quarters to spend the remaining time showering, shaving, and getting dressed for the auction. It turned out that Dumbledore had at least respected his wishes when it came to his robes. True, they weren't his preferred black, but at least there was no pink, red, or purple on them. They were dark green with silvery threading Slytherin colors. Bearable. He wondered if every bachelor would be wearing his own House colors.

He arrived on time and was immediately assigned a table, which he would be sharing with several women. He hoped one of them would be Hermione.

One of them wasn't.

In fact, as the women arrived and the dinner commenced, he didn't see Hermione anywhere. Of course, the room was quite large and crowded, so it was possible she was just out of his view. He ended up spending more time twisting and craning his neck than paying any attention to his dinner companions or actually eating any food.

He didn't see her all through the meal and was beginning to worry when it was time for him to report to the waiting room. He left the table without a word and made his way to the room, his eyes searching for Hermione as he went. Still, he didn't see her.

Inside the room, the first thing Severus noticed was that each man was indeed dressed in his House colors. Over the next few minutes, nervous and excited bachelors took their turns crowding around the list on the wall. Severus waited until they were clear to check his position in line. He was dead last, of course.

He watched through the door as Dumbledore took the stage and announced that the auction was about to begin. He invited the women to bid as many times and for as many bachelors as they pleased, but asked that once they had won someone, they not bid for anyone else.

First up was a very jumpy-looking Neville Longbottom. Severus thought with a snort that it was big of Dumbledore to let him go first to get it over with.

"Ladies, here we have bachelor number one, Mr. Neville Longbottom!" Dumbledore announced.

The nervous man almost stumbled onto the stage and stood in front of the crowd, looking like a trapped deer.

Inside the waiting room, they all wondered what was going on in the audience for about ten seconds until someone had the good sense to cast a one-way Transparency Charm on the wall. They all had a clear view when Dumbledore introduced Longbottom.

"Neville is brave, loyal, and a wonderful friend. He works for the Ministry of Magic as a Herbologist and likes to spend his free time in his greenhouse. Who would like to spend an evening with Neville? I open the bidding at three Galleons."

"Three Galleons!" chirped a grinning blonde near the stage, and then she giggled when Neville stared at her in surprise.

His surprise became shock when a young, attractive brunette near the back yelled, "Four Galleons!"

The bidding ensued, and a dazed but pleased Neville Longbottom ending up going to Ginny Weasley for eleven Galleons.

A few more bachelors went for respectable prices until it was Ron Weasley's turn. He strutted out onto the stage with confident grin on his face, puffing out his chest for the presumed benefit of the audience.

"Ladies, bachelor number four, Ronald Weasley. Ron plays Keeper for the Chudley Cannons. When he's not with his team, he spends his time with his friends and family." Dumbledore kindly didn't mention that Ron was second string or that he hadn't seen more than an hour of playing time in two seasons. "Who would like to spend an evening with Mr. Weasley?"

Dead silence.

Severus grinned.

Dumbledore apparently didn't know what to say. "Er, well... come now, ladies. I'm sure many of you would pay three Galleons for an evening in Ron's company."

More silence.

"Two Galleons?"

Both Dumbledore and Ron were looking distinctly uncomfortable now. Severus' grin had developed into a full-blown vindictive smirk.

*No one's going to bid for me, Weasley?*



"One Galleon, anyone?"

Another round of silence. Dumbledore and Ron let out audible sighs of relief when a lone voice said, "One Galleon."

Ron's relief turned to mortification as he and the rest of the room recognized the owner of the voice as Molly Weasley.

Back inside the waiting room, a few feet from Severus, Harry Potter glared daggers as Draco Malfoy wiped actual tears from his eyes.

He was still recovering when his name was called next. Draco unsurprisingly went for the highest bid yet at twenty-eight Galleons.

Up next was Fred Weasley, followed by George, who both went for a respectable fifteen galleons.

Ecstatic giggling filled the room, several bachelors later, when Harry Potter took the stage. He smiled a bit shyly at the room which of course made the giggling worse and Dumbledore began his introduction.

"Bachelor number eleven, Harry Potter. Harry is an Auror for the Ministry of Magic. He is modest, fiercely loyal, and has a streak for adventure. Harry spends his free time with his friends or on his broom. Do I hear three Gal?"

"Three Galleons!" a woman almost screeched.

"Four!" another countered, almost jumping out of her chair.

"Five Galleons!" yelled another, *actually* jumping out of her chair.

A bidding war ensued between many women, each determined to win Harry Potter, no matter the cost. Severus rolled his eyes as one woman actually pulled her wand on another when she was outbid.

"Really now, ladies," Dumbledore said, "let's try to keep a hold on ourselves, shall we?"

The woman scowled but put her wand away.

"Excellent, I believe we were at thirty-three Galleons. Do I hear thirty-four?"

An overwhelmed Harry Potter ended up going to a group of women who had pooled their funds together to outbid a persistent blonde near the back for the ridiculous sum of two hundred and seventy five Galleons.

Merlin, no wonder Potter's head was so big.

Remus Lupin went for ten Galleons, Charlie Weasley for thirteen. Lee Jordan went for nine and Blaise Zabini for fifteen.

Several other men Severus didn't know all went for somewhere between ten and twenty Galleons, and Severus took the opportunity, again, to search the now standing crowd for his Hermione. Unfortunately, there was simply no way find her, even if she was there. There were simply too many women, some hidden behind others.

And then it was his turn.

"Ladies, bachelor number twenty eight, Severus Snape."

Severus took a deep breath and walked onto the stage, holding his head up proudly. He turned stony-faced to the crowd, feeling his stomach doing flips.

"Severus is our Potions master here at Hogwarts. He is very intelligent, courageous, and an avid reader. He spends his free time in independent research." *Or with his girlfriend, Hermione Granger*, Severus added silently. "Do I hear three Galleons for Severus?"

There was the briefest of pauses, during which Severus wondered what would be worse, someone bidding for him or someone not bidding for him. Where was *Hermione*?

"Three Galleons!" piped a woman Severus didn't recognize, giving him an excited look.

"Four Galleons!" said another, and Severus was surprised. He honestly hadn't known what to expect.

"Five," said a greedy looking, middle-aged woman in nearly florescent pink robes. Severus' eyes widened. Where was Hermione, and why wasn't she bidding for him?

It escalated quickly, the women apparently more impressed by Severus' reputation as a dangerous ex-spy than he would have thought.

"Ten Galleons!" said a voice. Severus looked for its owner, but before he could find the woman, another yelled, "Eleven!"

That voice belonged to Greedy in Pink, and she was getting louder and more insistent. Severus shifted nervously.

"Twelve," said another, an attractive, raven-haired young woman this time.

The bidding went on until it was two women going back and forth Greedy and a voice whose owner Severus couldn't locate.

Greedy became more and more determined as she kept upping the bid. The voice didn't hesitate to counter, and soon Greedy was casting angry looks around, searching for her opponent.

"Thirty-five Galleons and *where are you?*" she demanded.

"Thirty-six," replied the voice calmly, still unseen.

"Thirty-seven!" she challenged and glared unattractively when she was outbid again.

This went on, Severus silently caught in the middle, until the unknown woman said, "Seventy-four."

Greedy let out an aggravated growl and spat, "Fine, you can have him! I doubt he'll give you the time of day, anyway, whoever you are!"

Severus couldn't argue that point and was feeling a little panicked that he'd just been sold to some woman he hadn't even seen. Apparently she'd been desperate enough to pay an exorbitant amount of money for him... Severus wondered if there was a reason she'd kept herself hidden and wondered once again, this time with irritation, where Hermione was. Why hadn't she saved him from this insanity? And why hadn't he seen her? She'd at least promised that she'd be there. He couldn't help feeling a bit betrayed.

"Right then!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "Severus Snape sold to Miss... er, sold for seventy-four Galleons. The auction is now over. All the winners will come up to the stage now and introduce themselves to their prize."

Thirty-one women came to the stage, but Severus was left there standing alone. He was about to march away when a piece of parchment appeared in his hands, apparently from his unknown winner.

*My dear Severus,*

*I think you should know that I couldn't let you go to someone else tonight. Before I show myself to you again in person, I want you to know something very important, something I should have told you before now. You are the love of my life, Severus. I have loved you for a very long time, and I plan to keep you for far longer than the evening I've paid for.*

Severus' eyes widened in horror and shock. It was even worse than he'd feared. Worse than some desperate woman paying a full two weeks' salary for a date with him. This woman, whoever she was, was obsessive bordering on psychopathic. She was in love with him? How could she be? She didn't even know him! He felt like the collar of his robe was suddenly constricting, strangling him, but then he read on.

*I want no more misunderstandings between us. Know that I love you, and never doubt it again. Every moment I've spent with you has made me happier than I ever imagined I could be. I don't know that I can express the depth of my feelings in words, but I'll try. I love everything about you. Your eyes, your smile rare though it sometimes is, your wit, the way your lips purse when you frown, your voice, your sarcasm, your passion, the way your heart pounds against me when you kiss me, the look in your eyes when we make love... all of you.*

*I don't want to ever be apart from you, and if it's all right with you, I want for the world to know it. I'm not ashamed to love you. If you want me, Severus, and if you're ready, say the word.*

"Hermione," he said softly as he folded the parchment, feeling his heart constrict with an overwhelming emotion he now recognized as love. There was no doubt in his mind who had written the letter.

She appeared, coming out of the crowd and walking the steps to the stage, smiling only for him.

She came to stand in front of him, grinning in a conspiratorial way. "You should have seen the look on your face when I won."

He growled, not really angry in the slightest. "Yes, that was very sneaky of you. I'm glad you enjoyed my discomfort."

She laughed and moved closer, taking his hands in hers. They both realized at the same time that conversation around them was dying. She leaned forward and whispered, "I think it's now or never, love. People are starting to stare."

He didn't even glance around, honestly not giving a damn who was watching or what they thought. He was going to kiss Hermione.

And he did, long and good. He enfolded her in his arms and held her tightly against him.

They broke apart minutes later, panting faintly. Hermione smiled and rested her head against his shoulder, taking in the shocked faces around her. Severus stroked her hair and kissed her forehead.

"I think we've made our point," he said. "Shall we go?"

"Let's."

They broke apart only enough to be able to walk properly and made their way towards the stairs at the edge of the stage.

"Hermione!" Harry gasped as they passed him. "You and... Snape!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Harry. Me and Snape. If you'll excuse us..."

"But, Hermione!" Ron said, looking wounded. "How could you? It's Snape! You could be with anyone. I don't know what he's done to you, but you don't have to... to... I mean you could even be with me!"

"Ron! How dare you accuse Severus of"

Severus cut her off, going for the kill. "And deprive all those broken-hearted young women lining up for you? I wouldn't dream of it. Ah, I must have forgotten there weren't any."

He smirked at the outraged, embarrassed look on Ron's face. "Do excuse us, Weasley. I believe you have a date with your mother to plan."

And with that he led Hermione out of the hall and straight to his quarters, where he spent the rest of the evening and most of the night thanking her in loving detail several times for rescuing him from bachelorhood, in more ways than one.

*The End*

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**More Notes from SB:** Okay. I hope the auction and lemons lived up to expectations, and I'd apologize for screwing Ron over if I were sorry.

I've been thinking of doing a short epilog, maybe to resolve the issue between Hermione and her mother and show the progression of Severus and Hermione's relationship. Of course, if I'm honest, I simply want to write another scene with Stephen Granger. I don't know; we'll see.

Until next time, your parting comments will sustain me!