

Melangell

by Tarah_Fae

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

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AN: After a bit of a break, I present a fic for your delectation and delight. It was written in March/April and does therefore not comply with the events of the Half-Blood Prince. I hope you will find it entertaining nonetheless. It picks up in the next chapter (which should be up in a day or two). Just giving you folks time to strap yourselves and your valuables down.

When the final blow was struck at the "battle to end all battles", he had been there – and so had she; her curls flying wildly around her face as they were caught by the gale of magic from the central combatants. Potter and the Dark Lord screaming in unison, a hellish duet set to the groans of the dying all around. There had been a loud, low *boom* followed by a rush of air toward the lone figure that remained. She had stumbled against him and he had grabbed her instinctively, anchoring her, holding her tightly against him as he dug his heels into the blood-soaked ground.

As suddenly as it had started, the movement of air had ceased. They had fallen over in a tangle of limbs and robes. She had been sprawled over him; he couldn't help but notice that she was clutching at his robes far tighter and for far longer than was strictly necessary. His arms were still around her waist as they lay panting and dazed.

A triumphant cry had sheared the cold air - a young voice hoarsely screaming its victory. The cry had been taken up and echoed across the battlefield by those still standing. It was over! They had won.

He had struggled upright, but she had refused to let go. The sob that had been muffled against his black robes alarmed him. His alarm had grown when she had flung her arms around his neck and curled up in his lap. Her ragged sobs had confused him; they had won – why was she distressed? His arms had encircled her, and had held her tightly, rocking her in an unconscious effort to soothe her.

With her wrapped up in his arms, her body pressed against his, he too had wept. They let the world pass them by as they had shared their relief, their longing, and their grief. For this one brief moment, he had opened himself up completely to another living person. Silent tears had streamed over his gaunt cheeks, glittering like a perverted wreath of diamonds where they had met her hair.

He didn't fully know how long they had sat like that, but, after a while, her sobbing had subsided and her breathing had become more even. Her hands, so urgently wound around his neck minutes before, had relaxed and rested against his chest. Her face had still been tucked into the hollow of his neck, the breath expelled from her mouth and nose a faint tickle on his neck.

He didn't know why he had done it, but he had pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

He remembered how he had carried her to the castle, not wanting to rouse her (what a ridiculous notion!). His muscles had been screaming in agony at each step, but he trudged on doggedly, ignoring the familiar faces among those of the slain. The makeshift infirmary in the Great Hall had been bustling with activity; blood streaked mediwitches and mediwizards darting from patient to patient – the undeniable look of remorse as they chose who would live and who would die had been etched onto their exhausted faces. He had put her down on an empty pallet in what appeared to be a recovery section and had left again.

And then... then Minerva had found him in the Entrance Hall... and had told him about Albus.

She remembered being startled awake by the anguished roar from the Entrance Hall. She had known it was *him*. She had been able to hear furniture splintering and cries as able-bodied men ran out to assist. More shouts had followed, the animalistic howls of pain threatening to drown them out. A dull *thud* ended all the commotion outside the Great Hall.

They had carried him inside – his body limp, his head lolling. A mediwizard had forced some calming potion down his throat as soon as he was lying down. Her eyes had darted to the doors, the grim look on McGonagall's face and *his* reaction confirming her worst fears.

Albus Dumbledore had not survived.

When they had left his bed, she had crawled over to him. She had been holding his limp hand, gently stroking it. She had never seen him looking this fragile, so utterly vulnerable. How much had he lost to make that day possible? How much pain could one man endure on behalf of others before he broke?

When she had woken up, he had gone.

She did not know the answers to these questions, nor would she be able to find them in books. Days later, she knew as she looked into his eyes through the flames that had engulfed Dumbledore's shrouded body, that the damage had been done.

At first she had tried to bury herself under her studies – as if she, too, were some war casualty. But, life went on. Day by day the horror of the final battle faded. The sorrow of the losses remained, but time also had a hand in making her feel them less keenly. She stopped expecting the twins to bound down the stairs whenever she visited the Burrow. She no longer missed the towering presence of Kingsley Shacklebolt at her Auror training. The memory of Neville's bumbling but sweet nature didn't tear so much at her heart whenever she read a Herbology book.

The years had passed, but her heart wasn't in her Auror work. Harry and Ron had fully embraced the Auror life, but she just didn't seem to enjoy it as much as they did. The Golden Trio had finally decided to part ways.

She had jumped at the chance when she spotted the advertisement in *The Daily Prophet*:

Vacancy: Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Available from the 15th of August. One year signed contract. Full room and board included. Competitive salary offered.

Contact: Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The salary hadn't been all that wonderful... but this didn't matter. She would be teaching and she would be back at Hogwarts. She had giggled as she readied herself for the interview – most people desperately wanted to get *away* from school... yet here she was, desperately hoping that she'd be allowed back in.

The rest was the proverbial history. This was her first night here as a staff member. In two weeks the students would arrive and she would have a purpose in life again. The skin at the back of her neck prickled... she slowly turned to see him there in the shadows, watching her, his expression unreadable.

He looked very much as she remembered him – tall and slender, his black hair carelessly framing his pale face, his sharp features set in an uncompromising sneer, his eyes dark but seeming to contain all the sadness in the world. There was a brittle look to him, despite his indifferent façade. Did *he* remember, too?

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The Hunter

Chapter 2 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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AN: I spoil you so another chapter already? The subtle seduction starts, with faint whiffs of lemon in the offing. Enjoy, my lovelies.

A quirked eyebrow was the only sign of surprise that registered on his face at her presence. What was *she* doing here? Wasn't she supposed to be running about with

Potter and Weasley, playing at being Aurors now that he, Severus Snape, had conveniently rid the world of most of the dark wizards? His hand tightened around the whisky tumbler and he eased further back into the shadows in the far corner of the staff room.

He snorted in disgust at the memories that flooded his mind; or rather the feelings that came with the memories. Whatever he had thought in that delusional moment of weakness, it wasn't true. He had merely been the closest person to her at that moment she would have done it to anyone. She hadn't fallen asleep in his arms because she harboured some sort of secret infatuation with him and felt safe with him she had been simply overwrought by the battle like the slip of a girl she was. Yes... that was all it was.

He gulped at the Old Ogden's in his tumbler, relishing the steady burn of the liquor. A relaxing warmth, by now familiar, settled in his chest. She was staring at him and he sneered out of habit, but she didn't flinch. Instead, a look of... pity... settled on her face.

PITY? He could feel himself shaking with barely controlled rage. How *dare* she pity him, like a bird with a broken wing? He had carefully avoided everyone's *pity* for years now. Not because he didn't deserve it, but because no one had any *inkling* of what he had lost. There wasn't enough pity in the world to salve his wounds, not any more. They had festered his humanity had turned gangrenous, poisoning his soul. Pity was too little, too late. Pity couldn't change anything. Pity wasn't a just reward.

She was walking toward him now. She was seeking him out? What for? His suspicious Slytherin mind came to full alert. He nearly dropped his glass when she took his hand; only years of training stopped the shock from reaching his face.

"Professor, I am so glad to see you are well." She offered a tentative, almost shy smile.

He stared blankly down at her. Women did not approach him. Women did not inquire about his health nor express pleasure at his wellbeing. Nobody did. He studied her surreptitiously her head was tilted to one side like a puppy, her pupils were slightly more dilated than the gloom demanded, her mouth was slightly open... dear Merlin... He nearly gasped when the tip of her tongue ran over her lower lip.

She was *attracted* to him? Could she be his... reward? He had to investigate this hunch further. He smoothly switched gears.

He had seemed so isolated. She wanted him to know that she understood the pain he felt she, too, had lost people dear to her in the war. Her parents had been killed in a Death Eater raid... and she knew that Dumbledore had been like a father to the dark man. He had had no one to talk to about it; she would let him know that she was there for him if he needed to talk.

She didn't know why she had taken his hand at the time, it seemed like a compassionate thing to do. He had stiffened at her touch, but hadn't moved away. She wanted to put him at ease, to let him know that he wasn't alone. She spoke first, smiling nervously when he just looked down at her impassively. A small bit of the old schoolgirl terror of the man crept back into her; her mouth went as dry as the Sahara.

She feared that she had gone too far until his thumb stroked lightly over her knuckles. "Professor Granger," he purred, his voice formal but his dark eyes suddenly smouldering. "I trust you are equally well?"

Hermione bit back a gasp. Although he hadn't moved, his stance had changed completely. Dark and guarded before, he was somehow more receptive, even seductively overwhelming now.

When her eyes widened for a fraction of a second, he knew he had hit the gold. Well, well... there was definite interest there. Conscious interest... perhaps not, but her body knew. If he could convince her body, her mind would follow. He would have to ease her into this. He suspected that the hunt would be challenging, even frustrating at times, but that the quarry was worth his patience. By the time he was done, she would be screaming his name.

Had he been a man prone to smiling, he would've been grinning ferally at her. As he was not, he just smirked.

He ignored her after that. Like a hunter sitting peacefully under a tree, letting the forest animals grow accustomed to his presence, he allowed her time to gauge him. He always made sure to sit in her direct line of sight at meals, careful to ignore her stealthy glances. Day by day she grew tamer, put at ease by his predictability. His apparent lack of interest in her both reassured her and piqued her interest in him.

Just as he had intended.

When she only spared him a few glances each mealtime, he started changing seating arrangements at every meal. She had seemed alarmed at first when he wasn't where she'd expected him to be, craning her neck to watch him as he spoke in quiet tones to Filius one meal and then conversed pleasantly with Rolanda the next.

After a few weeks of this, she had settled down again. It was time for the next step.

At the Halloween feast he saw, out of the corner of his eye, her pause uncertainly in her tracks. He was sitting right next to her usual seat, affecting an air of indifference and scowling at the rowdy children that all but ran riot in the Great Hall. He had to bite back a smile when he saw her mentally gathering herself and *marching* up to her seat, sitting down resolutely.

But, other than a murmured greeting, he ignored her.

She had seemed confused and distracted, merely pushing her food around on her plate. He on the other hand, ate well. Food had never tasted so good and he relished each bite as he watched her. He even helped himself to more, something he hadn't done since he was a student.

He sat next to her once a week at first... then twice... then three times... then on consecutive days... then not for a week. Finally he was sitting next to her at practically every meal. At first she was tense, but she gradually relaxed to his proximity. She didn't even twitch when he slid smoothly into the seat next to hers any more. She even graced him with a small smile and smaller talk during mealtimes, but he was careful not to give her too much attention, restricting himself to nods and short replies.

She had jumped when he lightly touched her wrist. "Would you be so kind as to pass the salt, Professor Granger?" He did not know how he had kept his voice so neutral the touch, although just a momentary brush of skin against skin, had sent a jolt of excitement straight to his crotch. He was infinitely grateful for his robes; not only did they hide his nearly painful erection quite effectively, but they were also not nearly as confining as Muggle trousers. Poor bastards, having to deal with those torture devices.

He expanded his repertoire. Brushing his fingers casually against the back of her hand when they passed in crowded corridors; letting his breath tickle her ear as he leaned in to talk in a low voice over the din at mealtimes; letting his fingers alight gently on the small of her back when he waved her into a room ahead of him. Soon, she was unconsciously mimicking his actions placing a hand on his arm when seeking his attention during meals; placing, rather than dropping, objects like quills into his graceful hands; resting a hand on his shoulder while she lowered herself into her seat.

Each night he relieved the unbearable pressure in his loins, thinking of her delectable body, groaning her name hoarsely as he climaxed. 'How much longer!' his body would scream at him as he lay panting. Patient... he had to be patient. She would come to him willingly. He was so close. Just a little while longer.

He took to 'accidentally' meeting her on her nightly patrols. They would stroll through the deserted corridors together, and she would murmur quiet conversation while he listened, not to what she was saying, but the soft sighs that escaped her lips whenever he brushed his hand across her skin.

On one such night, he found her standing by a window. The snow had introduced a crisp chill to the air, yet she stood there, her neck deliciously bare, her collar open far more than was prudent. The moonlight bathed its cool blue hue across her closed eyelids; her lashes attractive crescents upon her cheeks. Silent as a shadow, he slipped in behind her. His hand glided around her waist, never touching but close enough to feel the heat emanating from under her robes. She shuddered as he inhaled the scent of her hair and then lowered his head, his hot breath playing across the chilled skin at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. She was trembling in anticipation, she was barely breathing.

Control. He had to exercise control. He bit his lip as he withdrew from her, eliciting a cry of dismay from those luscious lips. Before she could whirl around, the shadows had enfolded him like a familiar lover. The frustrated growl that she uttered made his erection twitch longingly. He stifled a groan. It was for the best, she was almost ready.

He had to be patient.

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The Hunted

Chapter 3 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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AN: As promised – chapter 3, beta'ed and uploaded within 24hours. I don't have much to say except for "Hermione is smarter than she looks". Chapter the next is my favourite of the lot! */wind you up* As with the other chapters, it will be up as soon as you bribe me suffici... er we finish banging it into shape.

She wanted to scream in frustration. What was he doing? The past few months he had ignored her. He was barely friendly with her when they shared a meal, leaving her to do all the talking; as he did when they were patrolling together. When he did speak, he used that mind-blowingly sexy purr of his... it slithered into her ear like a lover's tongue and settled as an arousing warmth in the pit of her stomach. She groaned as she caressed her clit more urgently.

She didn't know how he always managed to find her in the dark corridors, but it both scared and thrilled her. She had been admiring the pristine white world outside the window when she had sensed him. Suddenly he had been there behind her, as insubstantial as a ghost, the soft rumbling of the breath which cycled through his chest roaring in her ears.

And then... his warmth... his hands... his breath... She shuddered in release, the remembered sensation of waiting for those lips to descend on her skin undoing her. Her body was still tightly strung, her orgasm doing nothing to dispel her restlessness. Why hadn't he kissed her? Why...?

As her mind skipped back over the events since she had started working at Hogwarts, her eyes went wide with realization. He was playing with her! Reeling her in like an expert fly-fisherman. Thinking back, he had shown extraordinary patience – habituating her over several months. She sat up in her bed, her face white with shock and rage. What game was he playing? What did he want? Why didn't he just court her openly? She would have been receptive.

But this...*this* reeked of the Slytherin mentality. He didn't want her to love him... he wanted her to beg for him.

'Two can play at this game, Severus Snape,' she thought, scowling darkly.

He had been rather surprised to find himself next to Pomona at breakfast. Hermione was sitting at the other end of the table, having an animated discussion with Hagrid. Severus scowled. Big, hairy oaf. He quickly composed his face into polite interest, trying his best to ignore Hermione's laughter.

When he managed to secure a seat next to her at dinner two days later, she had been decidedly cool towards him. She didn't touch him, and deftly avoided his hands without seeming to. He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth together slowly as she became embroiled in a conversation with Minerva.

Trying to catch her alone on patrol had also been impossible; she had taken to having long history discussions with Sir Nicholas while she walked. The ghost's pale glow framed her profile as she strolled past the dark nook into which Severus had ducked. The Gryffindor ghost would not be easily persuaded to leave her alone with him.

This wasn't supposed to be happening! Her affections seemed to be waning. She was supposed to be using that lovely mouth on him under his desk by now. What the hell had gone wrong? He had been patient. He had been in control. Where was his reward? He snarled into the darkness.

The following weeks were hell for his students. He was reported as stomping around his classroom, deducting points and pouncing on the smallest errors. Filch had more detention help than he knew what to do with and the trophy room had never housed shinier awards. Severus hardly ever showed up for meals any more. After an entire term of his diligently gracing almost every meal, this worried Minerva deeply.

"Severus, this cannot go on," she scolded him. He stood sullenly in front of her desk like a wayward student. He had refused a seat and had ignored her offer of tea. Minerva had tried broaching the subject gently, then diplomatically, and had finally in exasperation resorted to bluntness. "Students are in tears before even reaching your class! Whatever is bothering you had better be resolved and resolved *outside* your classroom. I will not let the students be terrorized in this manner. Albus may have let you get away with it, but I will not. Have I made myself clear?"

The man in front of her seemed to contract and then expand again, as if Albus' name had been a prism passing over him, distorting his shape. When he looked up, his face was passive, but his eyes burned. "Yes, Headmistress."

"And I want to see you at meals," she added, rifling irritably through some parchments on her desk. "We need to present a united front in the eyes of the students."

"Yes, Headmistress," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Oh, go on down to the dungeons to sulk, Severus," Minerva said, her tone gentle, even affectionate. "You may not believe it, but you are among friends. If you need help, you need only ask."

He gave her a curt nod and was about to leave the office when she added, "If you cannot resolve your problem yourself, I will be forced to take more drastic steps, Severus... Please do not make it necessary for me to resort to that."

Minerva sighed as her office door banged shut. She worried about that boy...

Severus bristled when he had to take the place next to her at lunch. It had been the only vacant seat left and he dared not go against Minerva's wishes. He had to stay. He ignored Hermione, not even returning her greeting. The scent of her wafted maddeningly at him throughout the meal; he had to consciously restrain himself from burying his nose in her hair and inhaling deeply.

His eyes flicked toward her – she had opted to wear her hair up today, leaving that delectable neck of hers invitingly open. Severus clenched his hand into a white-knuckled fist next to his plate as she idly twirled a loose strand around her finger – winding and unwinding... winding and unwinding. A faint flush was evident on her neck and cheek, but she was turned slightly away from him, chatting amiably with Poppy, paying him no heed despite his rudeness.

He simmered slowly through lunch and the rest of the day, his students almost more frightened of the quiet Potions master than the one running amuck. He was thinking, and a thinking Slytherin was a dangerous thing.

Sitting in front of his hearth that night, well on his way to being pleasantly sozzled, Severus came to a decision. Stomping around like an ogre wasn't doing his plan any good; he had to calm down. He had merely overestimated her attention span. All he had to do was reinforce some of the supports in his plan – it wasn't a total loss yet.

The swig of cheap firewhisky seared its way down to his belly. He could wait her out... he was, after all, a very patient man.

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Gone Too Far

Chapter 4 of 11

Summary: Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge.
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AN: This chapter in four words? "Bad Snape! No biscuit!" This is my favourite chapter for various reasons. Hints of lemon, but don't get your hopes up just yet. Posting might slow down a bit as I am tying up the tail-end of this little story.

The icy flicker of jealousy in her chest startled Hermione. Severus had just said something in Rolanda's ear, which left the flight instructor guffawing loudly. He was smirking, his eyes glittering mischievously. His mood had apparently improved greatly from yesterday. Their heads were bent close together again, Severus nodding attentively at whatever Rolanda was saying.

Hermione stabbed at her baked beans. Had she misinterpreted him? Was he really *not* interested in her? After all, all her evidence was merely circumstantial. He couldn't have been just trying to be polite by keeping her company as they patrolled. And everyone brushed up against you in crowded halls; it was simply unavoidable. And how else did you attract a person's attention at a noisy dinner table without politely touching their wrist?

She looked at them again. Severus' shoulders were completely relaxed as he accepted the cup of tea Rolanda had just poured him no sign of the hunched anger that was there yesterday. He even favoured the yellow-eyed witch with a small smile.

Hermione fumed at her plate her toast bearing the brunt of the glare she wanted to direct at the flight instructor. She *couldn't* have been mistaken! That night in front of the window... what was that all about? He hadn't actually done anything... he had withdrawn without even so much as touching her. She *had* been putting on a bit of a display... what man in his right mind wouldn't desire a young woman? Was she just inserting motives and feelings into the man's actions because she had a crush on him? Which explanation did she prefer being hunted languidly or being pounced at random?

Hermione nearly choked on her own tongue when she saw Rolanda's hand wrapped in Severus' long fingers.

Breakfast couldn't have gone better if Severus had planned it. He had ended up next to Rolanda, the only witch in staff that was near his age. Perfect; he knew where her

interests lay and deftly switched to talk about brooms. It turned out that Rolanda had been bamboozled by a 'friend' a racing broom she had bought through the man had not only been delivered four weeks later than expected but also had an unusual fungus growing on the bristles. Severus smoothly suggested what he would do with such a person's rod-and-tackle, which amused Rolanda so much that she guffawed loudly. She had always liked ribald jokes.

Then the discussion had turned to the fungus itself. It sounded fascinating from an academic point of view and unlike anything he had seen before. They had conversed quietly until Rolanda announced that all the talking was leaving her parched, and offered him a cup of tea. Taking in Hermione's scowl, he gladly accepted, allowing himself a small smile at having salvaged his plan.

When Rolanda had admitted that she had touched the fungus and asked if he could take a look, he could barely contain the crow of triumph that was trying to escape his throat. He had made a show of inspecting her fingers, making sure that it was in plain view of Hermione.

The aggressive scrape of her chair across the floor and the slam of the staff door made him smirk.

He was back in control.

And that was how the dance between them began. What seemed like casual indifference rather than conscious decision landed him next to Rolanda at most mealtimes. He usually steered the talk toward brooms and Quidditch under the pretence of pulsing her for any Slytherin advantage in the Cup running, thus ensuring her avid attention. Covertly making sure that Hermione was watching them, he would participate in lively discussion unlike he had ever done with the Defence mistress. He had thought she would physically turn green with envy within the week.

Passing her in the halls without touching her had taken a small amount of skilful footwork, but he had soon mastered the sweeping sidestep without being too obvious about it. He would always be very careful to rumble a "Professor Granger" as he passed, just to see her squirm. Much to his amusement, she had developed a sexy little diagonal sashay in an attempt to counter his sidestep and so they danced through the corridors, without anyone noticing.

Night patrols took on a whole new level of enjoyment for him. He would let her glimpse him at the far end of corridors and then stealthily slip into hidden nooks and crannies as she rounded the corner. He had even managed to get her to break into a run a few times, but her reaction was always the same when she was faced with an empty corridor she would stomp her foot and utter expletives that impressed even Severus.

They would play cat and mouse like this all night neither fully knowing who was who.

It was late May when she finally cracked. She had tired of the chase. She had been coiled like a jungle cat in the dark alcove, waiting for him to pass. She knew he eventually would, she had been there for three consecutive nights. When his soft footfalls approached, she drifted spectrally into his path. He couldn't avoid her... but it didn't look like he particularly wanted to.

When her mind finally caught up with events, his lips were firmly pressed to hers, his tongue demanding entry. His hands seemed to be everywhere; having managed to hook one of her legs over his hip, his left hand was firmly stroking up her thigh under her robes before clutching at her arse. Her hands were wound into his hair, her shoulders were pressed against the cold stone of the corridor, his chest leaning heavily against hers. She gasped wantonly as she felt him through his clothing hot and rigid grinding against her crotch.

Somewhere from the foggy depths of her lust, reason clawed its way to the surface. This was too much... too fast. They had to stop.

He growled deep in his throat as he sensed her reluctance. She was squirming in his grasp, her hands no longer tangling in his hair but on his shoulders, pushing him away. No! He was so close! Desperately tearing at her buttons, he pressed his member against the heat emanating from the juncture between her legs, wishing he had an extra hand to take care of the barrier between him and sublime pleasure. She was mewling, "Please... please..." into his mouth and he tried to convince himself that she was begging for it. He latched his lips onto her neck, sucking the skin hard enough to leave a red welt.

"Severus," she said in a suddenly firm voice, the hands pushing him away becoming more insistent, but he did not heed her words or her touch. "Severus! No!" Her fist was beating against his chest - he leaned forward to restrict her movement...

"*PROTEGO!*"

The shielding charm caught Severus full in the chest, flinging him across the narrow corridor and into the opposite wall. His ears were ringing as he struggled upright... He had gone too far. He should have backed off. Where the... How did she get her wand out so quickly? He winced at the ache in his shoulder. Auror defensive training was obviously still up to scratch.

Her wand was pointed squarely at his heart when his vision swam back into focus. She was visibly shaking but it was too dark in the corridor to make out her expression. "So you like hunting, do you Professor? Let's see what you think of it when the tables are turned."

His eyes widened in shock as the menace behind her words registered. He had made a dire mistake... His hand darted towards his own wand.

"*Bywyd Ysgyfarnog!*"

A spark of light erupted from the tip of her wand and slammed into him like a physical blow. His wand clattered uselessly on the flagstones, and he howled in agony as his bones cracked and reshaped themselves. Within seconds he was engulfed in a thick blackness.

Then all was quiet.

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Melangell's Curse

Chapter 5 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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AN: Alas, Severus wasn't turned into anything as interesting and exotic as a wombat or a llama, but I hope my choice and reasoning are satisfying. These two are in for a world of trouble, let me tell you.

Hermione had been horrified at his reaction. She hadn't expected the effects of the spell to be that painful, but then again the book hadn't been that specific, glossing over some details. She had just wanted to scare him. Oh, Merlin... was he even still alive?

With a trembling hand she reached out to the pile of black robes in front of her, carefully moving the inky material aside until she found him. He was lying very still, the flutter of his ribcage evidence of his shallow breathing.

He would be so angry; it would be better if he were restrained when he realized what had happened. Hermione gently picked him up by the scruff of the neck. His fur was surprisingly soft under her fingers and she had to resist the urge to stroke his velvety ears.

The pain had subsided but small tremors still shook him occasionally. There was a sudden tightness across his shoulders and then an odd lifting sensation. His body was nestled against a soft warmth as arms encircled him. 'Has she changed her mind?' he thought dazedly.

"Severus?" Although whispered, her voice seemed very loud to him. He willed his eyes to open, but found that he couldn't focus. He turned his head to fix her with one eye that seemed to work better. Hermione was chewing on her bottom lip, a nervous twitch he had observed over the past few months. "Can you understand me?"

He felt rather annoyed, of course he could understand the girl she was speaking English, wasn't she? He felt too tired to talk, so he just nodded impatiently. She looked relieved.

"Severus... I'm afraid I've done a rather foolish thing..."

Foolish indeed! What could be more foolish than rejecting him when the consummation of his their game had been so close? He kept his moody silence.

"I didn't mean to... I... I just came across this book, and it had the spell in it." She was chewing on her lip again. "I didn't think that Melan-"

Severus' ears swivelled toward the sound of the soft patter approaching... Wait... swivelled? He had a mere instant to consider this thought before the ball of orange fur crashed into his body, knocking him away from Hermione. The bloody hell?

Hermione had the wind knocked out of her as the huge cat pounced at the hare. "CROOKSHANKS! NO!"

The two animals were tumbling on the floor, somersaulting over each other in a flurry of fur and limbs. Severus was currently pinned to the floor, but evaded the bandy-legged cat by delivering a powerful kick to Crookshank's midsection. The cat yowled and Severus bounded up and out of a window.

Hermione rushed over, thanking all things holy that they were on the ground floor. "SEVERUS!" she yelled after him. "*PETRIFICUS TOTALIS!*" She sent several blasts of magic after him in an attempt to stop him, but he ducked and dived, the spells fizzling uselessly into the ground around him as he raced across the moonlit lawn.

She groaned in dismay, losing sight of Severus as the shadows of the Forbidden Forest swallowed him.

It took a long time before Severus' mind could regain control of his new body. His body operated on instinct, clouding out all rational thought. All he had wanted was to get as far away from danger as he could running seemed like a good way of doing this, 'where' was a secondary concern.

He finally threw himself down under the protection of a prickly shrub, too exhausted to run any further. As his body calmed down, his mind tried to get a grip on what had happened. Hermione had been angry and, although he was loath to admit, he knew she had every right to be. Her body and mouth had seemed so willing... things had got out of hand... his blood had boiled at the prospect of finally receiving his reward. 'What happened to all your Slytherin patience and control?' he berated himself.

He hadn't recognized the incantation she had used; no matter how intensively he searched his extensive mental library, he couldn't come up with anything even phonetically close. It was definitely not Latin-derived, so it had to be from a more ancient or obscure line of magic. She had said "Melan..."; maybe this was a clue that would help him out of this predicament.

He lay, considering the information he had at hand. As his muscles cooled and the adrenaline drained from his body, he winced as his shoulder stiffened up considerably. Crashing against the wall and then running, Merlin knew how far; it was protesting against its abuse. Severus gingerly stretched out his forelimb. He rolled his eyes as it suddenly struck him that he'd been overlooking the most obvious clue himself.

Sitting up, he inspected his new body. The black fur was probably just a vestige of his natural colouring, so he ignored it. His body was lean and sinewy, his chest deep, housing the machinery required to sustain a runner. His neat forepaws were tipped with sharp, non-retractable claws, but not those of a predator. His hindlegs were long and muscular, his thighs still quivering from exertion.

A hare? She had turned him into a hare?

A tale his grandmother had told countless times flooded back to him.

A nobleman was out hunting with his hounds one day. The faithful beasts soon flushed a handsome hare from a field of wheat. The creature had been wily, evading the hounds for a long time, before finally being cornered in thick, tangled undergrowth. The hounds stopped giving tongue as a human cry came from the vegetation. The nobleman called off the pack and waded into the thorns and branches to investigate. Instead of a hare, he found a young woman protecting an injured leveret.

"Please, my Lord. Spare the young one."

The nobleman was so moved by the girl's impassioned plea that he proclaimed all of the surrounding lands a haven to hares. The young woman became a saint, tending to lost and weary travellers in the abbey the nobleman built on that very spot. To this day, the abbey just a ruin, hunters do not give chase to hares on those lands, out of respect for the girl who had saved a lesser beast.

Her name was Melangell.

Fuck! Trust Hermione to be all poetic when meting out punishment! Everyone with an interest in the history of magic knew of Melangell's Gift the ability to transform into a hare at will. Muggle folklore was rife with tales of women taking on a hare's form to steal milk from unsuspecting farmers' cows or to cause trouble. It was very similar to modern-day Animagi, but relied on ancient magic to effect the change. There were certain... restrictions that applied to ancient magic. The spell could only be removed in the place it had been cast; a failing that cost the lives of many witches of old when they led their pursuers back to their homes in order to return to human form. "Melangell's Curse", more like it! Severus sneered.

He had to get back to the castle and find Hermione. Somehow... he had to convince her to remove the spell, and he had to do it without anyone else finding out. He would never live it down! This was not going to be... A rustle in the undergrowth interrupted his train of thought. He froze, his senses coming to full alert.

Something was heading straight for him.

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The Hunt

Chapter 6 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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AN: *cough* Now that NotSoSaintly has graced us with her presence *stern look* let us proceed! Enjoy folks!

"A wot?"

"A black hare, Hagrid."

"Well... I coul' set a coupla snares, I su'po-"

"NO! I don't want it harmed. It is a very valuable creature, I want it alive."

Hagrid looked down at the woman sitting at his scrubbed kitchen table. She had banged on his door at the crack of dawn, blabbering about black hares. She had that shiny-eyed and brittle look of someone who had not slept because of worry. Why was she worrying about wildlife? True, black was an unusual colour for a hare, but he had seen much stranger things in the Forest. He toyed with the idea of offering to round her up a black skitterbeast instead. Now, *those* were interesting! Why, he remembered the first time he saw one...

Hagrid was getting that faraway and excited look he always wore when he was thinking about something particularly nasty and dangerous. Hermione was horrified not so much at the prospect of being offered such an animal as a pet, but more at the knowledge of what Severus might be facing right now. Nobody knew exactly how many unmentionable beasts roamed the Forbidden Forest, but there were probably far more than she wanted to admit.

"Hagrid! Please, this is very important. I have to find hi... er... it as soon as possible."

The half-giant looked a bit puzzled. "Ah'ight, 'Ermione. I'll keep an eye open fer it."

"Thank you, Hagrid. I... I'll be back after classes to help you look."

Hagrid just shook his big shaggy head in confusion as Hermione left his cottage, leaving her tea untouched.

"Where's old grumpy-garters this morning?" Hermione was startled out of her distracted thoughts.

"What?"

"Severus. He hasn't shown up for breakfast yet," Rolanda said, spreading a thick layer of strawberry jam on her toast. "I got a cracking tip-off on some racing brooms for his team."

"Racing brooms?" Hermione's mind struggled to keep up.

"Yes! We've been discussing it for weeks. That man is passionate about his team, let me tell you! Didn't give me a moment's rest at mealtimes always yammering on about Quidditch." The yellow-eyed witch leant in and added conspiratorially, "Even I got tired of the subject!"

Hermione made a conscious effort to snap her jaw shut. That's what they've been whispering about? Stupid *Quidditch*? Damn him! He did that on purpose! Bloody Slytherins and their bloody scheming! She stabbed at a sausage; grease spurting from the punctures.

"Er... Hermione? You okay?"

"Oh, perfectly fine, Rolanda. In fact, I *did* see Severus very early this morning while on patrol. He seemed to be leaving the grounds so I asked him where he was off to. He said he was going to be away for a few days to collect some 'very important potions ingredients' he had just got wind of. If you ask me, they might have fallen off the back of a delivery broom, what with the cloak-and-dagger air Severus had about him."

The flight instructor chuckled merrily. "That's our Severus. Even the simplest tasks handled with as much mystery as possible. I'm sure his students will be crushed to be let off his classes for a few days."

The two women snickered. 'If he's still alive by the time I find him', Hermione thought, viciously biting into the sausage impaled on her fork, 'I swear I'll *kill* him.'

Somewhere along the edge of the Forbidden Forest, Severus doubted whether he would live much longer. Something big was moving through the undergrowth, directly to where he was crouching. He valiantly tried to battle his instinct to make a run for it he was already lost enough without adding another leg to the journey. In any case, it, whatever it was, was more than likely to see him if he made a dash for it right now the sun was peeking over the eastern horizon, bathing everything in soft golden light. He would stick out like an ogre's thumb!

A hoof thudded down right next to him. Only then did the warm, grassy scent finally infiltrate his panic. A moment later a graceful head adorned with a glittering horn swept into view as the unicorn started grazing. He had never been this close to one before and wondered whether the tingle of magic that surrounded them could be perceived by humans, or whether it was only obvious to his heightened animal senses. A sense of well-being seductively twined its way around his core, but he shook it off resolutely.

He could only deal with *one* instance of ancient magic per twenty-four hour period. He didn't have time to sit around and be beguiled by mythical creatures. The sooner he got back to Hogwarts, the sooner he could get out of this body.

The unicorn snorted in surprise when the black hare darted out from under its feet.

Hermione's anger had turned to worry again. She had been distracted all day not that her students minded when she forgot about her tight revision schedule on the board and left them to their own devices. After locking and warding her classroom, she dropped some paperwork in her office and then rushed outside.

"Hagrid! I'm here!" she panted breathlessly when he opened his door.

"Ah'tight, le' me get my crossbow an' we'll be all set."

Hagrid returned a few moments later with his crossbow over his shoulder and Fang at his heel. "Er... Hagrid? Do you think it is a good idea to bring Fang?"

"Ah course it is, 'Ermione. Old Fang is a right good sniffer! He'll be able to find your 'are!"

Hermione had her misgivings, but agreed to it. Hagrid did have a point - Severus was a needle in an awfully big haystack at the moment and they needed all the help they could get. To her delight, Fang picked up a trail after only a few seconds of sniffing around the place she last saw Severus. The big boarhound trotted off toward the west and they followed.

Dusk found Severus creeping along the edge of the Forest. It had been a harrowing day, trying both to stay out of sight and to move forward at the best possible speed. He had often caught the musky smell of predators as he travelled, reducing the hare part of him to a shivering wreck while his human part tried to cajole the uncooperative body onward again. He still had no idea where he was, hoping that following the scent of water would eventually lead him to the Great Lake.

Severus mentally sighed in exasperation when his body froze again. He stomped from one corner of his mind to the other while his hare instincts processed the "threat". Resigning himself to a wait, he turned his thoughts to what he had to do. Firstly, get back to Hogwarts. That had *seemed* like the simplest step, he groused, wishing he could glare at himself. Next, find Hermione and beg for mercy. Well, beg for mercy in the Slytherin way of course, which usually included blackmail. Now, the real question was whether a cute, fluffy rodent such as he would be able to blackmail anyone without ending up on the wrong side of a light and flaky crust?

Dog.

The abrupt conclusion reached by his animal mind jolted him from the inane course his ponderings had taken.

'Yes, yes, but a big dog or a small dog?' he inquired impatiently. Having two minds in one body was certainly exhausting, especially since one of them had the intelligence of a limp cabbage leaf... mmm... cabbage. 'Stop that!'

Bolstering his body's flagging confidence with promises of cabbage over the next hillock, he managed to hitch it into a sentry position to have a good look around. The light was fading fast, but he could still make out the huge boarhound against the black trees.

Hagrid's dog. Severus allowed his mental self a smirk. That coward couldn't hurt anything if it tried. Severus idly wondered why all of Hagrid's 'pets' hadn't been similarly inclined. Maybe this one was a dud?

Stopping his rambling before it began, he gave his head a shake. He found it harder and harder to focus as time wore on. He was becoming and he groaned at the pun more harebrained by the moment. Craning his neck, he looked for the dog's hulking master; the one was never that far from the other.

Then the scent reached his twitching nose. He had first inhaled that scent on that night, but it had so much more depth now; shades of flora and femininity that he envied his animal self's ability to pick out.

She was here. She'd come to find him.

All thoughts of dignity and blackmail melted in the golden evening as he raced across the grass, skipping over the long shadows stretching away from the dying sun, his heart feeling as if it would burst from relief, gratitude, lust it didn't matter, nothing mattered except getting to her; not even the whisper of air rushing through feathers. The impact crushed his breath from his body and excruciating pain sliced into his side.

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Out of the Woods

Chapter 7 of 11

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AN: Sorry for that absolutely BEASTLY wait folks, it was certainly not intentional (although, if I were evil *cough* that's where I would've left you hanging). Expect the next chapter in two days or so?

She had been smiling and walking swiftly towards the bounding shadow when the attack struck. Severus' shrill bleat of terror turned her blood stone cold.

"NOOO!" She was running now, waving her arms wildly. "GET AWAY FROM HIM!"

The large eagle owl was bent low over its quarry, its tawny wings half-spread and its beak clicking aggressively. Hermione could see it shifting its grip on the motionless body beneath it. NO! It must not lift off!

Without thinking, she made a dive for the hare, grabbing onto Severus with one hand and trying to fend the bird off with the other. Its wings pounded painfully against her head and shoulders, its scrabbling talons opening gashes on her arms, its cruelly curved beak scoring a deep cut on her forehead.

After what seemed an age, but was probably only a handful of seconds, the owl took off with a loud screech, the turbulence of its wings adding to the disarray of Hermione's hair. She felt rather than heard the fast thudding pace of Hagrid's approach.

"Get away, you ruddy bird! 'Ermione! Are you ah'ight?" Hands as big as spare tyres lifted her from the ground and steadied her. Hagrid's concerned face swam into view among the starfield of bright sparks dancing in front of her eyes.

A sob wrenched itself from her throat. "I've killed him!" Throwing herself against the reassuring solidity of the half-giant, she cried into the softness of his moleskin vest.

He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Nah, you didn't kill it. It is... natural and all tha'..." He felt horrible when this only seemed to make it worse. There was just no way to say "owls eat hares" that didn't sound insensitive. He'd been trying really hard lately to be more "sensitive" Olympe liked stuff like that.

He had known Hermione since her first year at the school and he couldn't ever remember seeing her more upset about anything; having been through a war with the young woman, that was saying a lot. Hagrid looked down at the object of her despair. Why did she care so much about *this* animal? It was a handsome creature, no doubt about that; solid black from the tip of its nose to the tips of its toes. Large, as hares go, and sleek. He sighed. It certainly was a pity tha...

Swiftly dropping to one knee, but keeping Hermione at his side with a comforting hand, he curled his huge fingers around the hare's chest. Yes! There it was the faint flutter of a heartbeat. He knew he had seen the poor mite twitch.

Scooping up the hare and depositing it in a startled Hermione's arms before lifting her onto his arm, he set off towards the school, his gargantuan strides devouring the distance. They had to hurry.

It had had a narrow escape; quite a few cracked ribs along its left side, deep lacerations that had miraculously not penetrated beyond the muscle and maybe a couple of sprained joints. Gentle palpation had suggested that there were no serious internal injuries, but shock could still be the undoing of the little creature. Hermione was patiently dribbling Hagrid's shock remedy into the unresponsive animal's mouth. She had waved him off impatiently when he had treated her scratches and the nasty cut on her forehead. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, but her mouth was set in a determined line, as if she could keep the injured hare alive through sheer force of will.

"Ah'ight, give it t' me so I can take a look a' those ribs." Hermione looked very reluctant to give up the little scrap of life she'd been cradling against her for the past half hour. "Ermione... it'll be ah'ight, I promise." She bit her bottom lip, tears sparkling afresh in her eyes as she nodded, and gently laid the hare on Hagrid's kitchen table.

Working on something so small in comparison to his huge hands was quite challenging, but he had never let a hurt animal down. With a deftness and grace that seemed supernatural, he treated the hare as best he could; shaving the area where the owl had struck, cleaning the gashes with anti-sepsis potion and applying bone-knitting ointment to the quivering ribcage.

Throughout the process, Hermione paced up and down on the other side of the table, twisting her fingers together so violently that Hagrid thought he might have to use the

bone-knitting ointment on *them* before too long. She was obviously trying to stay out of the way, but echoed every whimper that the hare uttered.

It was very late before Hagrid had finally done all he could for the injured animal. "Bes' we can do now is find it a nice warm box and le' it have some res'. I have a cosy cor-

"Can I take him up to the castle?"

"Er... ah course. Doesn' matter where it sleeps, I suppo-

He was caught off-guard by her hug. Even at full stretch her arms couldn't quite reach around his chest, but she squeezed fiercely regardless. "Thank you, Hagrid. I don't know what I would've done without you."

Flustered, but very pleased with her praise, Hagrid gave her the remedies he had used. She listened attentively as he explained how to apply them, her brows knitted together in keen concentration as if she didn't dare miss even the smallest detail.

The moon was hanging full and low over the castle by the time she wrapped the hare snugly in her cloak and stepped out of the front door. "Take care, 'Ermione." Hagrid stood, a tall, dark shape against the warm glow spilling from the doorway, until he saw the small bustling shadow that was Hermione reach the safety of the castle.

Hermione was exhausted as she slipped into her seat at breakfast. She'd been up all night tending to Severus; casting intricate warming charms, forcing him to drink the remedy Hagrid had given her, changing his bandages.

Crookshanks had been interested in the patient, but a stern warning from Hermione had sent the cat off to sulk on top of the bookcase. She knew he wouldn't do any harm to Severus. He had yowled indignantly at her from his vantage when she had commandeered his basket. "I'm sorry, Crooks. It is only for a little while, I promise," she had explained. He seemed to understand, as he always did, what she wanted from him.

She had left Severus sleeping fitfully. Hermione had been torn between staying with him or going on as usual, but the former would have raised too many questions. She promised herself she would check in on him between classes and spend her off-periods there. The students would just be revising for the examinations - Fridays near the end of term were never busy - and she wouldn't have any homework to mark. She'd have plenty of free time.

"Time" had become a very silly notion indeed. What need had one of time when one had nowhere in particular to go and nothing in particular to do? All that mattered was the present; the past a fading memory of unchangeable things and the future inconsequential to the here and now.

He drifted in and out of consciousness; sometimes The Cat would be curled up around him when he woke. At first he hadn't liked it - it had done something to him in the past... but he couldn't quite remember what. He certainly liked the warmth and felt momentary disappointment whenever The Cat left.

Then there was The Woman. He was dimly aware of missing her when she wasn't around, and he didn't know why his heart leapt when she touched him. His pain and fear lessened when she spoke to him. He had no idea what she was saying, but her voice was like a summer breeze, warm and gentle. If he could, he would wriggle in delight as it swept over him, but it hurt too much. Although, here, too, he had this niggling feeling that he shouldn't like her as much as he did.

Sometimes he woke up with a word in his head. *Hermione*. But what use did one like him have for words? He forgot it almost as soon as it registered. It was there again when she woke him. He closed his eyes, sighing blissfully as she stroked his ears, the word fading from his mind again. He couldn't guess why she shook as she held him, couldn't guess what was in store for him tonight.

Maybe it was better that way.

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Temptation at Bay

Chapter 8 of 11

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AN: Right, sorry for the delay folks but I have this puppy wrapped up now and the last few chapters will be coming more regularly. I'm going to complete this and *maybe* enter it for the Multifaceted Awards for shits and giggles, but I will definitely consider another serious break from ficcing after this. Anyway, enough about me and more about the chapter at hand - wafts of lemon in this chapter, but nothing too raunchy. Enjoy.

Hermione had breathed a sigh of relief; the book was exactly where she had left it in the library. The slender leatherbound codex had collected some more dust since she last used it - evidently no one cared much for '*Anianol Dewiniaeth, or, The Mysteries of ye British Magicians*'. A good thing it was too - she needed to double-check the reversal spell.

Not long after, she was back in her quarters. She sighed and rubbed at her burning eyes. It was only lunchtime, but it felt as if she were on the verge of collapse. The sandwich she had ordered was untouched, but she'd got through most of the coffee. Severus was sleeping again in the basket next to her on the bed. She had managed to force some gruel down his throat, but had stopped when he struggled, afraid that he'd do himself more damage.

'Better get on with some reading', she thought, carefully cracking the book open to the appropriate page. The ornate script and archaic spelling did nothing to improve the throbbing headache behind her eyes. Her hand flew to her mouth as if it could catch the gasp before it escaped. It couldn't be! She reread the sentence to make sure she wasn't mistaken.

"With each passing day, the man will be more unto a beast for the mind of man and beast cannot co-exist in the body of the beast."

This was *impossible*! Having always prided herself on looking, or rather researching, before she leapt, this was a major blow to her academic ego. Well, she hadn't exactly *planned* it, she reasoned. But she *had* cast a spell without knowing all its implications. That's what she got for insisting on poetic justice.

Wiping angrily at the treacherous tear on her cheek, she ignored the small annoying voice in her head, reminding her that she had only herself to blame for this. This was no time for a breakdown; she had to act and hope for the best. She would do it tonight.

Hermione was reaching for the coffee pot again at dinner, promising her tortured taste buds that she'd add more sugar this time, when Minerva turned to her.

"Have you seen Severus around?"

Hermione nearly dropped the pot in fright. Oh Merlin! Did she know? Had Hagrid told her what had happened last night? Had Minerva put two and two together? Hermione's eyes darted to the huge man who was shovelling whole jacket potatoes into his mouth. She should have told Hagrid to keep quiet about it not that it would have done any good, he always blabbed without meaning to. 'Calm down, Hermione,' she chided herself. 'It was a simple question, not an accusation. Just answer.'

Composing her face into what she hoped was surprised concern, she replied, "Not since the day before yesterday. Why?"

"I suspect the blasted man took my advice for once. I just wish he had given me some notice to arrange a substitute in his absence."

"Advice?"

"I told him he needed some rest. Well, not in so many words, but he did need some time away. He was long overdue; hadn't taken a single day off in the past five years." Minerva paused to sip her tea. "Where on earth did you get that nasty cut from?"

Hermione's hand darted to the cut on her forehead before she could stop it; she lowered it with great effort, her cheeks flushing red. "Tripped over Crookshanks this morning and caught the wardrobe. Silly cat."

Minerva looked unconvinced. "You look a bit peaky, dear. Are you feeling quite well?"

Hermione felt trapped by the penetrating gaze of the older woman. "I... Summer heat is getting to me, couldn't sleep last night." She smiled weakly.

"Oh, I know what you mean. It has been simply sweltering. I could show you a cooling charm that works wonderfully..."

Hermione smiled and nodded as Minerva spoke. At least one of her problems had been solved nobody would be alarmed if Severus didn't return for a few days. Now all she had to do was reverse the spell without killing him, convince him to forgive her somehow and then stay out of his way for the rest of her natural life lest he end it unnaturally.

Simple, really.

It was well past midnight, the halls would be at their most deserted now. It was now or never.

He twitched and groaned when she stroked him. Worrying at her lower lip with her teeth, she knew she had to make a decision. If she didn't cast the counterspell within the next few hours Severus could be lost forever, but she didn't know whether he would survive the transformation in his weakened state. Either way, he would be no more unless she did something. She had to try! She lifted him from the basket, and, gently cradling him against her, she carried him from the room.

He lifted his head groggily. Where was she taking him? Back out to... a memory played around the edges of his mind like a taunting child, just out of reach, then was gone. Ah well, it probably wasn't important.

The moonlight flashed over them as they passed by windows and slipped down dark corridors. Finally she set him down on cold flagstones. He panicked for a few short moments was she abandoning him? *Hermione*. He was desperately trying to struggle upright when she spoke to him. She seemed distressed, her hand trembling on his flank.

Abruptly, she moved off, turning on her heel a few steps away and pointing something at him. She spoke softly once more, then she stood up straighter and spoke in a firm voice. Light rushed at him; then, all he knew was pain.

Hermione's resolve had wavered at his response. His movements were weak and uncoordinated, but his terror was clear.

"Shhh... shhh... please don't, you'll hurt yourself." She stroked his soft fur he was quivering under her fingers, his eyes wide in confusion. She knew she couldn't leave it off a moment longer; he was losing himself.

'Do it, just *do it*, Hermione.' Steeling herself, she levelled her wand at him.

"I'm sorry," she murmured quietly. "*Atal Ysgyfarnog*!"

She fell to her knees as the figure in front of her twisted in agony the pitiful bleating of the hare shifting jaggedly to the screams of a man. His limbs stretched, his body filled out, his fur melted away into his skin. His joints cracked and popped as the connections were altered.

After what seemed like an eternity, the corridor was quiet once more. Severus' pale skin glowed eerily in the darkness where he lay sprawled on the floor. Hermione gave a start when he groaned loudly. Quickly crawling to his side, she turned him over.

"Severus?" Her fingers sought out the pulse in his neck it was fast but strong. "Severus, can you hear me?" She turned his face towards her. "Seve-"

"Myaaaaah?" Hermione's head snapped around. A raggedy cat was watching them, its huge lamp-like eyes glittering. Mrs. Norris. Hermione strained her ears for the shuffling gait of the cat's master. Filch would no doubt appear round the corner within the next few minutes, his lamp held out in front of him like a shield.

Throwing her cloak around Severus, she hastily levitated the unresponsive man. There was no time to waste.

Hermione quickly shrugged into her dressing gown; she'd had to shed her blood-spattered robes. The violent transformation had opened up the gashes in his side, but at least she'd been able to treat him with more effective potions now that he was human again. He'd flailed weakly in protest when she forced a bitter cocktail pain-relieving and Blood-Replenishing potions, with a small measure of Skele-Gro down his throat but quieted down considerably as it took effect.

His left side was a disturbing imitation of a cloudy night in miniature huge blue-black bruises with scraps of pale skin trapped between them stretched from his shoulder down to his hip. Where his skin wasn't bruised, it was grimy from his ordeal.

Lazy swirls of steam reached into the air above the basin of hot water before fading into nothingness. After wringing out the facecloth, she gently wiped his face. He groaned at the contact, trying to turn his face away from the damp flannel, but then relaxed into her restraining hand on his cheek. For a split second, she thought he was nuzzling her palm, but he had gone quite still again.

Rinsing the flannel between wipes, she worked her way down his neck, over his chest, and down each arm, trying to ignore the thrill of feeling his wiry muscles flex at the contact. Cradling his hand in hers, she stroked down each of his long tapered fingers, forcefully stopping herself from pressing her lips to his upturned palm.

She suddenly frowned. Why shouldn't she? It was unlikely that she'd ever have this opportunity again *he* certainly wouldn't allow it. Rebelling against his imagined rebuff, she kissed his palm. Such a small innocent gesture, but it left her panting. His skin had been warm and salty against her lips. Her tongue darted out to taste him again.

A shiver ran through her body. She had to stop... she wouldn't be *able* to stop if she continued. Besides, it was wrong. She couldn't take advantage of him in his weakened state, he probably hated her enough already without adding molestation to the list.

She closed her eyes in shame as images of entangled limbs and bedsheets barged to the forefront of her mind. Taking in a deep shuddering breath, she continued washing him, her touch clinical and efficient now until she reached his groin. She hesitated, her true motivations for wanting to do it warring with the lack of good reasons not to.

'Do it, just *do* it, Hermione.' She echoed her words of earlier.

She tried not to relish the sudden twitch he gave when she ran the facecloth around his member; she tried to ignore the low moan that escaped his lips. Her brash advances would not have been so well received had he been conscious; the thought sent the building thrill in her chest crashing down.

Taking the opportunity to dress his wounds once more now that he was cleaner, she tried not to lower her gaze further down his naked body than was strictly necessary to do her work. He gasped when she massaged the thick bruise-healing paste into his side and sighed when she dribbled the Murtlap Essence into his cuts. Who knew the quiet man would be this vocal in an unguarded moment? 'Would he be this vocal when...' She violently shook her head to banish the question.

When she'd finished bandaging up his chest, she pulled the sheets up around him; not so much to keep him warm, as to keep temptation at bay.

Reaching for the bowl of ice she'd requested from the kitchens, she pressed a small chunk against her lips, allowing her tongue to sweep over it to start the melting. Running the ice over his parched mouth, she was relieved when he unconsciously licked the water from his lips. With infinite patience, she repeated the process over and over again.

Penance was served, one drop at a time.

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Breaking Point

Chapter 9 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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Credit: Credit goes to my wonderful beta, Tevildo, for cleaning up my horrible punctuation and grammar. Any errors that remain after he is done with a chapter, are solely my own. Feel free to pelt me with cauldron cakes for these.

AN: We're in the home stretch now, my dear readers, so please take care to keep your hands and heads inside the carriage at all times and have a pleasant ride. Lemon zestiness abound in this chapter.

The ceiling swam into focus above him. All he was aware of was the insistent pressure in his bladder. Fumbling along the walls and hissing at the ache in his joints, he eventually stumbled into a dark bathroom. His hands were clumsy as if his brain only had a vague recollection of how they were to be used, but somehow he managed without making too much of a mess.

The day before was a flurry of confusing memories, each vying for equal attention. Snatches of images raced across his mind the large orange cat, the old scarf that had lined the basket, the woman... no Hermione, he corrected himself, the excruciating pain of transformation *that* was so vivid that Severus was violently sick in the sink.

He tried to ease the burning in his throat by drinking water from the tap. It was unbelievably cool and soothing as he gulped down great big swallows of it; stopping only

when it made him feel ill again.

He half-fell onto the bed, not sure how he had made it back there. His head was spinning and the throbbing in his side had worsened. His breath came in shallow gasps, his chest restricted by tight bandages it felt as though someone was rubbing shards of glass into his skin. Bright pinpricks of light faded into blackness as he fled from the burgeoning pain into unconsciousness.

Hermione woke to soft snoring near her ear. Crookshanks knew he wasn't allowed on her pillow. Sunlight was streaming in under the heavy curtains, the light crawling across the rug to hide under the bed. Thank God, it was Saturday and she could have a lie-in. She reached up to pet Crooks anyway silly cat was probably just jealous of...

Her eyes snapped open as her fingers and mind made contact simultaneously. Her body tensed up when Severus groaned softly and tightened his arm around her waist, curling in closer to her back and resettling his face near her shoulder again.

Damn it! She'd done what she always did when she fell asleep in her chair reading gone back to bed! It happened with such regularity that often she didn't even need to wake up fully to perform the task. She had not even noticed Severus there when she had settled down. His position was inadvertently pinning her hair, trapping her. His breathing was deep and steady against her bare neck; he was sleeping, not comatose. There would be no slipping away quietly and pretending that nothing had happened.

Shitshitshi-

Panic suddenly turned to lust when he shifted in his sleep; his fingers brushing against the underside of her breast where her dressing gown had come undone. The throbbing between her legs sprang to life as if that casual touch had closed a breaker, bringing everything into sharp focus.

She had to have him! Even if it was the last thing she did before he blasted her to oblivion for her impertinence and presumption. If he was going to be angry about them sleeping in the same bed, he might as well be angry about her hand on his cock when he woke up.

Acting before her nerve deserted her, she reached for her goal. She was rewarded with a low moan as she gently squeezed him towards arousal his skin velvet-soft in her grip as he swelled. Gingerly rolling his balls between her fingers made his hips flex in apparent appreciation; she gasped when his fingers tickled up her ribs to cup the breast they had been resting against.

"Hmmm..." he intoned sleepily as he slowly thrust into her hand. She shivered, feeling the vibration of his voice against her skin rather than hearing it. Severus' fingertips were flitting idly over a hardened nipple when she felt his lips on her neck.

Then he froze.

She had had her eyes closed, drinking in all the sensations, trying to commit each to memory, certain that she wouldn't feel them again. She cringed, turning her head slowly to witness the horrified expression on Severus' face.

He sprang away from her as if scalded. "What the fu- AAAAAARRRGH!" he roared, clutching at his side.

This wasn't entirely what she had had in mind.

He had been having the most wonderfully erotic dream, or at least that's what he thought. Then, his brain had prompted him into a higher state of wakefulness, where he could take full advantage of whatever was waiting on the other side of sleep.

That delectable scent of flowers and *woman* had been everywhere when he woke. "Hmmm..." he murmured as he inhaled, making full use of the accommodating hand clasped around his cock while his fingers explored the body in front of him. Only one woman smelt like this.

Hermione.

His sudden withdrawal was a mistake a sharp pain stabbed into his side. She scrambled upright at his reaction. It was almost comical the way she retracted and then gravitated towards him again a split second later, her fright turned to concern.

"Are you alright?"

"No, I am not bloody well 'alright'," he growled. For a moment his hand wavered between holding the pain in his side at bay and covering his raging hard-on. Considering the circumstances of a minute ago, and deciding that she had probably had ample opportunity to ogle him while he was unconscious anyway, he opted for the former. He struggled up against the headboard, leaning his head back against the wood and waiting for the spasm to pass.

"Are you in pain?" He answered with a roll of his eyes, not bothering to waste his breath. She sprang into action, rounding on her bedside table and rifling through numerous little phials residing there. He spotted a distinctive bottle off to one side cloudy glass in a stylized skeleton shape.

"You gave me *Skele-Gro* for cracked ribs?" he asked, sarcasm thick on his voice. "That would explain my current..." He grunted as another sharp tingle ran over his chest. "discomfort. *Skele-Gro* is for *replacing* bones, Miss Granger, *not* healing them."

Her face flushed red. "It was the best I could do. I didn't know the healing charm."

"The Know-It-All doesn't know it all? Be still my beating heart!"

Her cheeks were now blotchy. "Well, sorry for trying to help, *Professor*," she shot back, annoyed. "Here." She pressed the small phial into his hand.

Uncorking it, he took a sniff at the contents. "Tut, tut, Miss Granger, you know I cannot take this potion on an empty stomach it could cause extreme nausea and dizziness. It is a good thing I am lucid again, had I not been, you might have nursed me to death." He sneered at her, ignoring her dangerous glare.

Temporary insanity. That's what it had been. There was no other explanation for wanting to shag him senseless a mere thirty minutes ago. At least she had had a small victory when he couldn't feed himself, his hand trembling too much. Of course the mulish prat had blamed her "indiscriminate application of potions of which she did not have the foggiest understanding" for his weakness.

They glowered at each other over every spoonful of chicken broth she delivered to his mouth.

Ugh! To think she would've liked nothing better than to devour those lips with hungry kisses! Despite her mind's tirade, her body was still aching with need. Severus hadn't bothered covering himself up, he hadn't seemed to notice that he was naked on the bed of the woman he had hunted for months. She felt distinctly that this was yet another game who would flinch first. She took up the gauntlet, stubbornly refusing to tie her dressing gown's cord, allowing the curves of her breasts and her navel to be framed by its trailing edges.

Neither of them looked away from the other's eyes it was the unspoken rule.

"Would you please drink the pain-reliever *now*?" she inquired archly after she had cleared the bowls away.

"Miss Granger, what guarantee have I that you are not trying to poison me?" he replied smoothly, uncorking the bottle anyway while he spoke. His formal manner in these ridiculous circumstances grated on her nerves and the twinkle in his eye told her that he knew.

"Just. Drink. It," she grated, her patience hanging by a gossamer thread.

"No need to get testy, Miss Granger." He gulped down the dose. "I am being remarkably lenient considering your transgressions."

"My transgressions?" she spluttered in disbelief. "Let us talk about *your* behaviour, my dear *Professor*." The amused glitter in his eyes turned dangerous with a suddenness that startled her, but she pressed her advantage. "You stalked me for close to ten months and you *dare* question my actions?"

"Some," his eyes flashed, indicating that he would heartily agree with these people, "would say your reaction was disproportionate to the offence."

"You got *exactly* what you deserved."

She had folded her arms over her chest and jutted her chin out defiantly. 'The bloody self-righteous little bint!' he thought.

"You turned me into a *rodent*, Hermione!"

She began to puff up indignantly. "*Technically*, hares are not rode-"

"I DON'T CARE!" She was *not* going to turn this into a lecture on taxonomy! "You nearly got me killed!"

She shrank back from him for a fraction of a second before jumping up onto her knees to jab her finger into his chest. "Don't you pin that on me! You managed running off all on your own!"

"Which I would not have done had your stupid fleabag not attacked me!"

"Don't you insult my cat, you insufferable man!" They were nose to nose now. Her face had gone bright red in her rage. He could feel her breath on his face as she yelled at him, see her eyes spark golden fury, smell that intoxicating scent he found utterly irresistible. She was magnificent.

"And another thi-"

The rest of the sentence died on her lips as he kissed her soundly.

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Trophy

Chapter 10 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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AN: Yup, children and internet connections will always make a liar out of you. This would have been up last night, but my radio connection died in the last few paragraphs' beta-ing. I hate it when life makes me keep my loyal readers on tenterhooks! Just one more installment to go, so enjoy.

His fingers were tight around her upper arms, but judging from the enthusiasm she was returning the kiss with, it was an unnecessary precaution. Her tongue had gladly accepted the invitation in and was presently erotically entangled with his.

Oh God! His need was overwhelming her senses. All she could focus on was his mouth and the now insistent hardness pressing against her hip. She basked in the sharp intake of breath when she gripped him, purring and pressing her body against his, certain that she saw the almost imperceptible edge of his pupil dilate to its fullest extent with lust.

As one hand roughly fondled a breast that had escaped her dressing gown, eliciting moans of pleasure from its owner, the other firmly traced the curve of her spine, onto her hip, down over her luscious ass and coming to rest on the tender flesh just under it. His ribs were in agony as he half sat up to continue his assault, gentle pressure from his hand urging her to straddle him.

Needing no more prompting, she slung her leg over his narrow hips but hovered just out of reach. The smooth head of his cock was resting against her inner thigh, dribbling small amounts of wetness onto her skin with each impatient twitch. "Hermione... please..." his voice had an eerily desperate edge to it, his hand now clutching at her bottom, trying to lower her onto his throbbing erection.

'Please don't stop... not now... so close' was dashed from his mind as she descended, allowing him to sink balls-deep into her grasping warmth. He growled lustfully, kissing her fiercely but placing a restraining hand on her hip to keep her still until he had calmed down somewhat. Wrapping her legs around him, he cradled her on his

crossed legs, kissing each shoulder as he slipped her dressing gown off.

As if prearranged, they started a sensual dance; the steps they had practiced in the hallways finally coming together. Heading towards a common goal, they sped up, their groans and gasps often echoing each other, each moving with consummate precision. Her whimpers ratcheted up in pitch as he liberally tasted her neck, her chest, her painfully hard and enticingly pink nipples; the slip-sliding friction escalating in urgency as they both neared their climax.

He was the first to break, a strangled grunt preceding the sharp involuntary upward thrust of his hips. His hand darted in, skilfully playing over her slick clit like a master violinist, his reward almost as musical to his ears as Hermione cried out her release; her cunt clutching greedily at his still-pulsing cock, making him gasp anew.

Both wrapped around and within the other, they rode out the twitches, spasms, and delicious shudders that claimed their post-orgasmic bodies. Falling back onto the bed, he held her to him as they panted, running his hands over the smooth skin of her back. All she could do was listen to his heart racing in his chest in perfect tandem with the loud pounding of her own.

She felt a gentle touch on her chin and rose up to respond to the unspoken request, languidly kissing Severus, stroking the fingers of her free hand through the hair fanned out on the pillows underneath him.

Hermione broke off when she felt him cringing the realization that she was leaning rather heavily on his ribs finally dawning. To her surprise, he lifted slightly off the bed to give her another quick kiss before settling back.

"Sorry," she murmured, her eyes darting around his face trying to avoid the smouldering look he was levelling at her. "I'm hurting you." She shifted her weight, sitting back on her heels and plucking self-consciously at the rumpled sheets.

"You excel at that, Hermione. It is what makes you... endearing." He smirked at her frown his comment had been intentionally ambiguous. Severus found that the only way to stay in control with this woman was to keep her unbalanced, keep her from thinking. As he felt a renewed twitch in his groin, he could think of many more ways to keep her... distracted.

"I should... take care of this," Hermione muttered, indicating the bandages around his chest. "If they get infected, I will never hear the end of it." She shot him a small smile. She wasn't sure how he did it a short while ago she would have happily hexed his balls off, but now she had decidedly different plans for them. If she just kept busy she might calm down enough to regain the upper hand.

Judging from the way her pulse sped up once she had uncovered his pale chest she was losing this round. Simultaneous gasps from the competitors when she lightly ran her hands over the healing bruises evened the score. Taking a deep steadying breath she started rubbing the twins' bruise ointment into Severus' skin.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only when I breathe," he quipped. "With luck, the side-effects of the potion will soon wear off, and the pain-reliever helps." He was lightly running his hand up her arm, stopping at the first deep laceration the owl's talons had left. "You should tend to yourself. It would not do for such a pretty young thing to be scarred."

She eyed Severus warily. Even though he was lying back against the pillows, his naked body nonchalantly sprawled over her bed, there was a certain alertness about him that made her very nervous, as if he was waiting for an opening. He seemed to be able to switch his emotions on and off at will one moment shouting at her, the next being so sweet that she hardly recognized him. His unpredictability caused a certain giddy anticipation (or was it dread?) within her. He appeared harmless enough; the stubble on his face reducing his usual fierce persona to something less intimidating, somehow more human.

But she wasn't fooled.

"Why do you play these games, Severus?" she asked quietly, not daring to meet his eyes, knowing she would forget her intent if she drowned in those depths again.

She was thinking again this would not do. Ignoring her question, he tutted and turned her face to him. "Such a nasty cut. If you will not take care of yourself, allow me." Pushing himself upright, he turned his attention to the collection of bottles on the dressing table. He was sure he smelt Murtlap before. His questing fingers brushed over polished wood; it sent a tingle up his arm his wand. Perfect. Picking up the bottle of Murtlap Essence and a spare length of bandage, he turned back to Hermione.

"Come closer, my sweet. Let us get that cut seen to."

"I asked you a question." She wasn't going to let him worm his way out of this one, she didn't trust his calm at all. He had all the air of a snake waiting to strike; his indulgent smile mere false reassurance. She batted his hand and the soaked cloth away. He easily snatched her wrist and she gasped at the deceptively strong grip, though the touch to her forehead was very gentle.

"I play these 'games', Hermione, because I like winning," he said, not a drop of remorse on his lips as he pressed the bandage to her wound. "I play these 'games' because they are exciting, because they make me feel alive." He leaned in close to her, his voice dropping an octave into a thrumming purr. "Did they not thrill you? Did you not enjoy them? Think carefully before you lie to me now."

She shivered as his hot breath washed over her cheek and shoulder. He was right. The seduction had been the most erotic, and most frustrating, thing she had ever experienced. He had made her yearn for unspeakable things with the lightest of touches, the most cursory of glances. She had never felt so alive: every minute of it had been steeped in intense desire for and from this man. "Yes..."

He smiled against her neck as she arched to his touch on her back. "Do you think rules are important?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"Should rule-breakers be punished?"

She was squirming in discomfort now, but he held her fast. "Well, it really depe-"

"Yes or no, Hermione?"

She stiffened in his arms. "...yes."

"Good." Taking her down with him, he rolled her onto her back, his body half covering hers. Nuzzling her neck, he murmured, "My sweet, sweet thing. My reward."

She sighed in relief as Severus kissed her passionately, and relaxed into his ministrations. 'How utterly silly!' Hermione thought. She had been afraid that something horrible had been about to happen, but who could have guessed at the true sensual depth of the man currently feasting on her nipples, plucking at them with his lips, teasing them into evermore pleasurably painful peaks. His intensity just took some getting used to.

She froze when she felt a wandtip cold and still against the hollow of her throat.

He was lazily kissing his way back up her chest, pressing a peck against her unresponsive lips. "So sweet... so very sweet," he breathed, licking and then nibbling at her chin. "One might almost regret this course of action, but a lesson must be learnt. You have always stood by the importance of education, haven't you, my sweet?" He looked into her eyes, wide with shock, her pupils terrified pinpricks in the brown depths. She didn't say anything, didn't breathe, didn't move.

A small flash of magic arced between the tip of his wand and her skin.

He smiled down at her. "I knew you would agree."

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Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

Machiavellian wooing at its finest - a tale of love (or something like it), ancient magic and good old revenge. (Marked "Alternate Universe" for not complying with the events of HBP).

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AN: Phew! What a ride! Thank you to everyone who has stuck by me throughout this fic. I hope you were as entertained as I was. But I'm sure you folks would much rather find out what happened next than listen to me blab, so read on, dear readers, read on!

Minerva was surprised to see Severus at breakfast the following Monday morning. She had been worried about him, but he looked rested, relaxed... and supremely smug about something. She had known him for far too long not to recognize the subtle upturn at the corners of his mouth and the barely suppressed glitter of amusement in his dark eyes even at this distance. She wondered what he was up to, but he left before she could work her way over to him. There was a slight limp to his step and he seemed to be favouring his left side, but it didn't impede his departure much.

A nagging feeling that it had not been coincidence skittered momentarily around her mind before falling over the edge. He was no doubt just anxious to get back to work and see his classes through the last few days of revision. She pitied the students; he would make up for the two days they had lost last week in a brutal fashion. She sighed and braced herself for complaints to stream in anew from student body and disgruntled parents alike.

Dawdling over her cup of tea, she noticed a marked absence from the head table. Hermione. She hadn't seen the girl all weekend, come to think about it. It wasn't like Hermione to just go missing. Even on days when she had been ill, her familiar had always reported in for his mistress. There was no sign of either of them; very odd indeed. She'd have to check in on Hermione's quarters to make sure she was all right, she *had* looked positively miserable on Friday. The girl worked much too hard, it was a good thing the summer holidays were just around the corner. Hermione needed the break.

Finishing her tea, she hurried the last few stragglers, still trying to cram one last piece of toast down their throats, along to their classes.

There had been no answer at Hermione's quarters. Usually the cat would yowl loudly at visitors through the door, but today there was nothing to indicate that either was present within the rooms.

Minerva made her way down to Severus' class. She *had* noticed that the two of them had grown closer over the past year, even though they had seemed oblivious to the palpable chemistry between them, and they were definitely friends after a fashion. Maybe Hermione had mentioned something to him?

She arrived just in time to see students gushing from the classroom like water from a cracked kettle. Standing aside, she let them rush past her. Instead of the terrified expressions she had expected, some of the children were actually smiling; and not just the ones from Slytherin.

Severus had his back to the door and was clearing away some cauldrons when she peeked in. "Good day, Severus. May I have a few moments of your time?"

"Ah, Minerva. Of course, do step into my office," he said, waving her to the door behind his lectern. The use of her first name was not lost on her. He had insisted on her title the last time they spoke, so this was a definite improvement. It made her suspicious.

He ordered some tea via the Floo before showing her into a chair in front of his desk, slipping into his own highback once she was seated. Leaning forward onto his arms in an uncharacteristic show of informality, he watched her expectantly.

"You seem in high spirits, Severus. Have you had a good rest?"

He smirked. "Oh, a simply unequalled experience. Fresh air, plenty of exercise and strict diet do wonders for the human spirit." Minerva ignored the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"You could have given me more notice. I had a substitute ready to take over from today."

Severus sat back, a parody of shock on his sharp features. "Am I so easily replaced?" he asked in a hurt tone before settling onto his arms again. "I told the young man that his... services would not be required. I suspect he is waiting outside your office as we speak."

Damn. She had better go see to that as soon as possible; better cut to the chase. "Severus, do you know where Hermi-"

A tea service popped into existence on his desk. "Tea?" he asked politely, already pouring out a cup of the steaming sepia liquid.

"No, thank you. I can't stay that long."

"Very well," he murmured as he dropped two sugar cubes into the cup and stirred it slowly.

Minerva cleared her throat. "Anyway, have you seen Professor Granger? She seems to have disappeared."

Severus didn't look at her when he answered. "Not recently." Then he sat up abruptly and growled, "Get away from there!"

Thinking that he was talking to her at first, Minerva spluttered, "I beg your pardon?"

"Not you, Minerva. The cat." Severus had got up to grab hold of a huge orange cat Hermione's. "I found this beast wandering the corridors. I thought that Hermione may have accidentally locked him out, but the damn creature has been eyeing my new pet all day."

Only then did Minerva notice the gilded cage on the side table. Its filigree curls and coldly gleaming bars housed a ridiculously ordinary little brown bird. It was flitting excitedly from perch to perch, its lighter underbelly flashing occasionally with its rapid movements. "Is that a-?"

"Nightingale, yes." She knew she had recognized the unprepossessing bird she had been quite a twitcher in her day and had even spotted a wild phoenix in the deserts of Assyria once. She shook off the nostalgia.

"Does it sing?"

Severus had dropped the cat on the sofa and was now staring down at the little bird behind the golden bars. "Unfortunately not. It is a female, but I am sure she would sing for me if she could." He had a faraway look in his eyes as he touched his fingers to the cage.

Minerva felt like she was intruding on something intimate, and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "A pity. Still, a lovely bird. I've always thought the legend of the Nightingale and the Rose to be quite sad."

A ghost of a smile passed over his lips. "I have always found it... poetic." His free hand had drifted to caress his side. "Love... love is a thorny issue and sometimes one must bleed for it."

"Yes... ahem... Well," she stammered, getting up from the chair, "if you hear from Hermione, please let me know. I am quite anxious about her."

"No need, Minerva, no need," Severus murmured. "She can take care of herself. She will *probably* return in a day or so. I am certain she is close by, isn't she, my sweet?" he cooed down at the bird.

"If you say so, Severus." She had never seen the man dote on another living being, but she didn't have time to think about it right now. "I will see you at lunch."

The man seemed to be lost in the beady gaze of the bird. "Hmmm? Yes, yes, of course."

Minerva rushed off to deal with the substitute.

THE END.

The Educational Section of our Show:

Hah! Thought I'd let you get away without some truly interesting links and factoids to peruse? Think again!

1. "**twitcher**" - A quaint British term for an hobbyist ornithologist or birder.

2. "**sepia**" - A word we all use a lot, but do you know where it comes from? "Sepia" actually refers to a cuttlefish genus. Their ink was used to create the pigment we all love to reference in our descriptions of things brown! :)

3. **The Nightingale and the Rose** A story by Oscar Wilde about how love has no real place in an ordered, logical and materialistic society like ours. Very poignant but also very telling of true human nature, methinks. (**PLEASE NOTE:** I dissuade the sensitive among us from reading this story it could be quite distressing.)

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If you enjoy my stories, please vote for *Melangell* (in Intelligence & Courage) and [Cute as a Button](#) (in Endurance)!