

Tale of the Nightshirt

by Ladymage Samiko

In the depths of night, someone comes a-rapping on Hermione's door. For the GS100 'grey nightshirt' challenge.

Lights Out

Chapter 1 of 20

In the depths of night, someone comes a-rapping on Hermione's door. For the GS100 'grey nightshirt' challenge.

Lights Out

Loud. Insistent. Irritating. Someone was banging on her door. At four in the morning. Who in the hell would be at her door at four in the damned morning?

Whoever it was would be very, *very* sorry.

Severus waited outside the chit's door, wand tapping in annoyance. What was taking her so bloody long?

The door was suddenly yanked open. "What the *hell* do you want?" Hermione snapped.

Severus didn't answer. He was too busy gaping at the hem of her grey T-shirt, which was only just long enough to cover the essentials.

He never saw the right hook coming.

Rising Sun

Chapter 2 of 20

In which Snape lacks coherence and Hermione realizes the power of hems.

Rising Sun

Snape's scowl, it must be said, wasn't nearly so intimidating when it was filtered through a darkening black eye. The glare he gave her when she handed him an ice pack didn't quite work right either.

Not to mention that it was pretty obvious he was ogling her bum when he thought she wasn't looking. The ogling definitely took the Evil Bastard edge off.

It was a good enough reason not to run and change.

But still, what in the hell was he doing here? Hermione repeated the question aloud.

Distracted by the crossing of legs, Severus intelligently replied, "What?"

Flight of Fancy

Chapter 3 of 20

Severus finally regains some coherence.

Flight of Fancy

"I won't ask again," Hermione said darkly.

Recovering somewhat, Snape dragged his eyes from shirt-hem to face. "There is," he drawled slowly, "an *emergency* at the Ministry."

Hermione made a face. "Which means, I suppose," she huffed, "that someone's let a niffler loose, or something similar. I don't imagine you know?" He shook his head silently. "Didn't think so. Well," she said, hauling herself up from the couch, "I better change and be off. Bloody Ministry."

"Why in Merlin's name do you work there?" Snape inquired.

Hermione shrugged before disappearing into her bedroom. "It's the only game in town, sir."

Hermione began feeling guilty as she slipped her nightshirt off. It wasn't Snape's fault. He'd been indentured to the Ministry as a sort of glorified errand boy after the war. (They'd called it 'reparation'.) And it certainly wasn't his fault she hadn't put a robe on. Nor that she was a right bitch when awakened.

And, to be perfectly honest, it felt nice to be thought worth ogling.

"You're..." she called hesitantly, "you're welcome to stay as long as you like. No reason one of us shouldn't get some sleep. I know it's a long flight since I've no Floo."

Snape was absolutely gobsmacked. She'd opened her home (not that it was much) to him. The feeling didn't abate as he watched her bustle about purposefully, collecting the what-not she might need. She picked out the last things, stuffing them in her purse, then dropped a key into his hand.

"Just lock up," she told him, "if you leave before I return."

She had to have been distracted. That must have been it. For, as she left, she leaned over, kissing his cheek as a friend might.

And then there was only her scent of roses in the air.

Wandering Hands

Chapter 4 of 20

Hermione has wandered and returned. The nightshirt... has merely wandered.

Wandering Hands

Four pm. Nearly *twelve bloody hours* of dealing with hysterical witches and (for her sins) a small family of effing nifflers.

Hermione was sincerely Not Amused.

She didn't blame the nifflers. She rather liked the little furballs, truth be told. She *did*, however, want to hex idiot witches who hadn't the wit to handle them and moronic night shift workers who couldn't find their arses with a map.

Hermione knew she had to get away from people before something nasty happened that landed her in Azkaban.

Oblivious to all, Hermione made a beeline from her front door to the bed.

Oh, life was much better now. A few hours' sleep was just the thing to realign her view of the universe. Even if she hadn't been able to find her usual nightshirt. A good dinner and all would be well with the world. Humming, Hermione went to rummage in her refrigerator.

She nearly tripped over her own feet to see Snape still upon her couch, stretched out in an apparently deep sleep. The poor man looked exhausted, she thought sympathetically. *I'll let him sleep.*

And then she noticed the grey bit of fabric tucked under his cheek as a pillow.

She had no words. She had absolutely no words. Snape was using her nightshirt for a pillow. There were simply no coherent thoughts that could express the... the... how she felt. Astonishment didn't even begin to cover it.

Then she sighed. What difference did it make? He'd probably just picked it up from wherever she'd left it; she'd no throw pillows after all. And she was hardly going to snatch it out from underneath him.

How could she wake a man who bore a black eye she'd given him and looked like death warmed over? It was just a shirt.

Warmth. Warmth and roses. The fading dream was a garden of brilliant roses; their scent lingered as he drifted into consciousness.

Severus's eyes snapped open. He'd only meant to doze for a few moments before returning home. Judging from the blanket weight over him, he'd slept far longer than he'd meant— and had been completely oblivious of the girl's return.

But why was the scent of roses still so strong? She could hardly be hovering over him just for the hell of it.

Severus's face turned a deep crimson when he recognized the cloth he'd unconsciously crumpled under his head.

Circumnavigation

Chapter 5 of 20

Snape feels awkward, and Hermione feels feminine.

Circumnavigation

Severus heard the soft footsteps approaching and quickly shut his eyes.

There was a sigh above him. She was probably exasperated at finding him still unconscious.

"You should have done this yourself," she murmured. *She knows I'm awake.* But instead of the expected accusations, a small hand brushed hair away from his face. Automatically, he flinched and heard another sigh in response. "I hope this doesn't wake you," she continued. "You must've been exhausted not to make it yourself; you *know* I've a full potions pantry."

A coolness spread across his eye, where Hermione had carefully placed a soothing compress.

Hermione watched him a moment before retreating to the kitchen; she'd clean-up to do and rather thought it best if she wasn't around when Snape awoke. He'd probably throw a big enough fit as it was. She knew him well enough now to know he abhorred being— or seeming —vulnerable. Falling asleep on her couch definitely qualified. And the way he had stared at her earlier... completely beyond his normal bounds.

She had to admit, though, after her initial feminist outrage... Well, it was nice being regarded as a woman for once— and attractive, at that —by someone she respected.

"Thank you."

The words were curt and ungraceful as Snape tried handing the compress back to Hermione.

"You should use it a bit longer," she replied; he still had faint bruise-edges. "You're welcome, though."

"I should've left hours ago, Miss Granger."

She shrugged, pretending not to notice his discomfort. "I wouldn't've made the invitation if I didn't mean it." Which was true. "Clap that thing back on while I cook. It's my fault you need it; dinner's the least I can do."

Feeling an awkward fool, Severus returned to the sofa. That damned T-shirt still lay upon its arm.

Mercury Rising

Chapter 6 of 20

Both Hermione and Severus find their... perspectives... changing.

Mercury Rising

Dinner was rather stilted, conversation occurring in awkward fits and starts. Snape was attempting to deal with his mortification and, as a consequence, was taciturn, though manners kept him from being a *completely* surly git. Hermione, for her part, was realizing the down-side of having Snape see her as a woman: she was seeing him as a man. (Instead of a professor, a very different entity.)

In fact, an *entirely* different entity.

Oh, he hadn't changed. She knew that. He was still a snarky, homely man, but sitting across from him at the dinner table, she began to notice... things.

His hands. Hermione had never really *looked* at them before. But now she noticed that they were large hands, and sinewy, rather like daVinci's 'David.' Long fingers, moving with deft precision as he manipulated his utensils. Would they manipulate *her* with that same dexterity? What would they be like to the touch? Smooth and well-tended as valued instruments? Or calloused and scarred from accidents and labour? How would they feel as they trailed down her body and...?

Hermione flushed and refocused her attention on her plate. Food. Yes. Food was good. Necessary. Prosaic. Certainly nothing suggestive of sex, except... Damn.

He'd noticed Hermione's high colour during dinner and attributed it to frustration at his continued presence. After all, he wasn't a pleasant conversationalist by any standard, and this mess had begun with him staring at her legs. She'd very nice ones, honestly, but he doubted he was someone she wanted looking. Even if it was her own bloody fault he had. Women were like that. Why else the black eye?

But they *were* nice legs. Come to think of it, the breasts weren't half-bad, either. Nor her hands as she...

Damn. Focus, man. Eat quickly and get the hell out.

Hermione took full advantage of the silence, putting her mind to work in its usual methodical way, and had come to a conclusion by the time she'd stacked the dishes on the kitchen counter.

Severus hovered uneasily near the door. He didn't need to be a complete prat nowadays and wanted to take his leave properly. "Hm. I appreciate the dinner, Miss Granger..." For the sake of his sanity, he did not thank her again for his, hm, nap. He wasn't babbling, but he couldn't seem to find an end.

Hermione found it for him as her lips claimed his.

Across the Bows

Chapter 7 of 20

Severus retreats and regroup. Hermione responds accordingly.

Across the Bows

Much later, Hermione would swear Severus leapt an entire foot upwards— before springing five feet back.

"What in...?" Not *quite* a scream, but there was no mistaking his shock.

Hermione tried not to feel hurt. "You seemed... interested," she explained quietly.

"Feeling *charitable*, then, *Miss Granger*?" Snape sneered. "Or just desperate?"

Her face froze. Snape tensed, but didn't expect the solid fist to his solar plexus— or to be tossed bodily out the front door by Hermione's reactivated wards. As an afterthought, Hermione snatched her nightshirt and flung it out after him. She'd never want to wear it again anyway.

'*Charity*!' '*Desperate*!' For the first time, Hermione understood the phrase 'seeing red'. She swore. She threw small, fragile objects. She kicked the furniture. She paid no notice to the tears streaming down her cheeks.

But it couldn't last forever. Hermione finally broke down and sobbed in sheer humiliation. 'Desperate...' She must have been, to even consider *Snape*, of all people...! But she had been honest.

And he had been cruel. Deliberately, unequivocally cruel.

He'd meant to wound, just as he had when she was a child. But she'd be damned if she gave him the satisfaction of knowing he'd succeeded.

Living well is the best revenge, they say. Hermione was prepared to do so— to a point. After all, it wouldn't do to have anything Pro— *that man* could point to and say, "She did that because of what I said."

So when Hermione dressed the next day, she wore make-up, but only to polish her features a bit— not unusual for her. Her robes were work-casual, but altered just enough to flatter her figure a little more. She'd learned that feminine armour was not to be disdained.

It was a damned confident woman who left her flat that morning.

Snape was nearly always at the Ministry; his orders kept him stalking— he never *ran*—through every corridor as he delivered messages and packages deemed too sensitive to be trusted to magically-propelled methods.

It was work a half-witted, adolescent *troll* could have managed. But as *they* would hardly have trusted *him* to brew potions for general consumption, he was reduced to glorified messenger boy while working out the term of his 'probation'. Ludicrous, but it beat Azkaban.

It also meant that he saw *her* when she arrived, cheeks rosy, chest rising and falling rapidly due to a Muggle-like commute.

Hell.

He could have had her, the night before. He might not be terribly experienced, but he'd been able to read the offer she'd made in her kiss. He'd had the opportunity to spend the night with a young, willing, fairly good-looking witch. Whatever her reasons.

And he'd fucked it up. The first opportunity in... a long time... to get laid, and he'd fucked it up. Royally.

Idiot.

Watching her as she dashed through the hall, oblivious to his presence, he could imagine that flushed face above him, those full breasts bare and moving just that way as she...

Bloody idiot.

AN - Apologies for the delay, everyone. And apologies to those expecting certain... content in this chapter. I was, too, to be honest, and prepping to write it... when Severus just *had* to open his mouth.

Relative Properties

Chapter 8 of 20

Attempts are made on both sides to restore equilibrium.

Relative Properties

Hermione was far from oblivious; she knew precisely what that slim column of shadow was and where. She also knew it would be fatal to pay him the least attention for there were still far too many emotions roiling through her system— and being arrested for public disturbance and/or assault was *not* something she considered a good idea. So Hermione hurried herself into her miniscule office, grateful when she arrived without incident, and conjured a mirror. Yes, still intact. Excellent. She wondered if her brief appearance had created the desired effect; was Snape in any way regretting what he'd rejected?

Hermione was a lucky soul: once engaged in her work, *nothing* broke through that single-minded purpose. Involved in research, she had been known to miss both meals and sleep— and had nearly been locked in the Ministry on several occasions. Bruised heart and pride were trifles compared to (currently) the habits of Tasmanian trolls. Which was why, at lunchtime, the clock Harry had bought her pelted her with Bott's Beans to get her attention.

Hermione blinked at it in bemusement, tidied up, and went to lunch.

She did *not* expect to find Severus Snape at her door when she returned.

"This," Snape barked abruptly, thrusting a paper-wrapped parcel nearly into her nose, "belongs to you."

Indifference, Hermione told herself. *Complete indifference*.

"Thank you for returning it." She congratulated herself on her even tone. *Was this some conversational gambit? What of mine does he—?* Oh. Her nightshirt. That damned nightshirt. The bloody bit of cloth that had started this whole mess. "Are you sure you'd rather not keep it?" she inquired, unlocking her door. "After all, you seemed rather... *attached* to it yesterday."

"It is *your* property, Miss Granger." Equal indifference.

But *was* that a hint of red on his cheek?

Snape continued on blithely. "And while you appear to have an unusual penchant for bestowing *undesirable objects* upon other people, I refuse to participate in your bizarre charity."

Hermione hated that she could feel her face heat and that odd lump form in her throat. Last night, she had been saved by anger; this afternoon afforded no such protections. So much for salvaging her dignity.

"Very well, *Mister Snape*," she replied, hating equally that tremor in her voice. "Leave it by the door. I'm sorry that you feel so strongly about things that are given in good faith. Good afternoon."

She could *feel* him hesitating as she seated herself behind the bulwarks of research material. Concentrating fiercely on the age-darkened parchment before her, she reiterated, "*Good afternoon*, Mister Snape." It was as much as she could say without losing control entirely.

He left, closed the door sharply behind him. Thanks be to whatever gods there were for that.

Hermione moved carefully, as though a single wrong gesture would free the tears lurking behind her eyes. Unwrapping the paper, she breathed in the rose scent from her sachets. But there was another, newer scent beneath it: the rich green of cypress.

Reverberation

Chapter 9 of 20

An episode is concluded... or is it?

Reverberation

The doors of the Ministry were far too thin. Contrary to his instinct, Snape paused at Granger's door and absorbed the small sounds of sobs that filtered through. He'd merely meant to return the damned shirt, which he'd unconsciously taken with him; he'd wanted this... episode done with. But she'd needled him... and he'd reacted with a sledgehammer. Well, the chit ought to know better by now.

But he really hadn't thought she'd be this... sensitive. She'd lost her temper last night; shouldn't that have been the end of it?

Severus cast a Silencing Charm before sweeping down the corridor.

There was no sign of, well, anything the following day when he saw Hermione rushing through the halls with her customary energy. She nodded as she usually did when she passed him, the curls escaping her ties bouncing with the movement. He recalled the way they'd clouded around her torso, glowing against the grey... Lips thinning, he made his way outside; he'd several packages and notes for St. Mungo's.

The next few weeks continued in this vein; he performed his tasks, and they greeted each other politely in passing. Aside from a few errant thoughts, life was back to normal.

"Seen Hermione lately?"

Snape stiffened before realizing that Potter was behind him, addressing the occupant of the next booth.

"Nope," young Weasley's food-stuffed voice answered. "Somethin' wrong, Harry?"

"She's at it again." Potter sounded grim, and Severus frowned. At *what* again?

The silence was palpable. "Is it after-the-war bad?" Weasley, surprisingly, seemed just as serious.

"No. Not *yet*, anyway. But I'm not betting on anything."

"Fucking hell. What happened? And when?"

"Like she'd say? And nobody else seems to know *anything*." Potter's frustration was... alarming next to Weasley's rising hysteria. "But *someone* must, and I intend to find out who."

Snape hated being half-informed, and nothing of the boys' further conversation filled in the gaps. Granger was obviously in some sort of self-inflicted trouble, but what sort? He'd spent weeks in hospital after the war, but she'd seemed perfectly fine when he'd seen her afterwards. What didn't he know? And why were those baffle-brains worried about her being 'at it again'? Oh, for the days when he could use Legilimancy and claim necessity as an excuse. But then, he didn't *need* Legilimancy to ferret out information. In this case, he thought with a thin smile, he'd beat Potter to the punch.

Need to Know

Chapter 10 of 20

Severus attempts to delve into Hermione's past to discover what the boys were referring to.

Need to Know

His first priority: preliminary reconnaissance. Snape needed to assess the situation with as unbiased an eye as possible. So for the next week, Snape observed Miss Granger—and came to a few startled realizations.

He realized that he'd seen very little of her recently, coming or going. It seemed she arrived before most wizards had even awakened and left after the majority—including himself, who spent as little time as possible in the godforsaken building—had returned home. According to the account records, she must be taking meals in the Ministry canteen, but he'd yet to catch her at it.

Positive *mountains* of books, scrolls, parchment, tablets, and stelae were being credited to Granger's office by the day. Snape noted her materials, but made no attempt to analyse them; the nature of her work was not—as yet—relevant to his investigation. But the amount she got through was rather... impressive, actually.

Luck found him on one particular day: Granger was called out for field work, and he was able to watch her closely as she left and returned. She looked well enough, by his estimation; a little thin, perhaps, but nothing to merit the alarm of the twitterpated duo.

News archives were the next source that Severus sought. Not that *The Prophet* was any more than a cheap tabloid, but it was the only contemporary source.

Headlines bombarded him as he examined the relevant half-year. "*Golden Trio Prove Triumphant!*" "*Hermione Helps War-Wounded!*" (with photo; he recognized that familiar swift tread into St. Mungo's.) "*Golden Girl Pens Magical Memoir!*" The girl was practically divinized, though Snape had to admit that her headlines were far fewer than her companions; she must've tried to avoid the spotlight. But the only event he hadn't known previously was her volunteer work. No help here.

He read the bloody memoir. At home, with wards in place. A copy he'd pinched from someone's look-how-cultured-I-am shelf. He wouldn't have been caught dead purchasing or borrowing the damned thing.

And yet, it was surprisingly readable. It made no pretense of being anything more than it was: a record of events and feelings as Hermione Granger remembered them. No attempts at analysing other people's motives. No dramatization or commentaries. Just a girl who had seen and experienced far more than she ought to have done. Far more than any child ought. Severus remained thoughtful long after finishing the book.

He maintained his surveillance; the disjunction between the boys' perceptions and the girl's demeanor continued to rankle. Hermione maintained her intensive work schedule, but as one who became exhaustively involved in his own projects (and who'd observed her youthful habits), he could not see a problem therein. Perhaps he'd merely been witness to some overreaction; perhaps they were merely worried that if she didn't conduct herself as an ordinary, libido-driven twenty-something, Hermione was going to end up living alone with forty Kneazles.

Not that she had to; Severus still vividly remembered those long, toned legs beneath that brief grey shirt.

Need to Know II

Chapter 11 of 20

Severus continues seeking information.

Need to Know

Minerva was a ridiculously easy mark. Just a modicum of subtle direction, and it was possible to discover nearly everything she knew about a subject—without her realizing that the information had been deliberately elicited. Gryffindors. Absolutely no sense of discretion, even when they knew they faced a Slytherin.

"Hermione was magnificent," Minerva reminisced. "The child was everywhere—helping the wounded, organizing the chaos. She made an entire Auror squad stand down with a single glare." Minerva's expression, on a less dignified woman, would have been called a grin. "But then, *Severus*, she had an excellent teacher in that regard."

Settling back in his chair, Severus made an idle connection between Minerva's mention of the wounded and the 'hospital' headline he had seen, characteristically ignoring her amusement. To his surprise, the comment sobered Minerva thoroughly.

"Her visits weren't *entirely* altruistic," she said quietly. "She'd incurred more internal damage than we'd realized from Bellatrix's curses." Her lips thinned. "Hermione, poor child, needed quite a bit a healing and reversal done. I believe she would have gone in any case—goodness knows we were short-handed—but volunteering gave her a

plausible reason in order to keep those bloody reporters from digging further."

If there was one thing that Severus missed of Hogwarts, it was the miles of corridors that allowed him to pace with a certain sense of purpose as his mind untangled the snarls of his thoughts. The tiny house he'd moved into could only afford a charmed never-ending hallway.

Granger's memoir had severely downplayed her encounter with Bellatrix— understandable, but the idea... Severus was nearly physically ill to think of Hermione subjected to the extensive damage Bellatrix had been capable of. Perhaps... something... had triggered a relapse. Having hidden her treatment initially, doing so now would be easy — and logical.

AN: This was basically an addendum to the last section; 'new' stuff should be due out later tonight/tomorrow. I hope everyone's enjoying and, if you can, please drop a little token in the review box. Thank you!

Mirror Image

Chapter 12 of 20

Sometimes we see only what we want to see.

Mirror Image

Her loose shirt was black, not grey, and thankfully, she wore a pair of shorts as well. Not that he was looking. "What is it, Snape?" He blinked at her curtness.

"I—" He hunted for proper words. "You look bloody awful." Not something he'd meant to say. True, however. The black emphasized her pallor, and dark circles rimmed her eyes.

"Thank you so much," she replied sourly. "If that's all? Or would you like to insult my intelligence, as well?"

"I—"

"You keep saying that."

"I apologise."

She stared at him for a moment, then sighed. "You'd better come in."

The interior of the flat was in marginally better condition; it was overstuffed with research materials, but they were at least organised by some idiosyncratic, Byzantine method— which didn't hide the inch of dust on various surfaces, nor the piles of dishes and take-away cartons in the kitchen.

But at least the cartons showed that she'd been eating.

She started to make tea and seemed confused when she couldn't find clean cups. Observing her narrowly, Severus couldn't discern any sign of post-curse relapse. Perhaps the idiots *had* simply been starting at shadows. And wasting a good deal of his time.

Hermione winced slightly when she bent to give Severus his tea, and she could tell that he noticed. Well, bully for him. "So what brings you to my doorstep?" she asked. She hadn't the energy to reciprocate his nastiness. "I thought I'd given the Ministry their weekly pound of flesh— and so had you."

"I have," he answered evenly, sipping the English Breakfast.

"Then you're here merely to insult me? You can do that more easily at work, you know."

He shrugged. "My comment earlier was an honest, if inadvertent, reaction rather than an intentional insult. You ~~do~~ look awful."

"Is 'awful' your *general* opinion of my appearance, sir, or specific to this evening?" Hermione asked waspishly.

Snape made an exasperated sound. "Come, girl, haven't you even *glanced* at a mirror recently?"

"I don't see what that—" Hermione broke off with a squawk as he grabbed her wrist and towed her into the bathroom. She blinked at the image in the mirror before her. "Oh." Her customary hair and makeup charms were now so ingrained that she rarely bothered to consult a mirror; she hadn't realised how run down she'd become. It wasn't *too* bad, but it certainly wasn't good.

"Am I now *quite* clear?" Snape grated.

Hermione nodded. "I hadn't realised..." She sighed.

"Would you care to explain yourself, *Miss* Granger?" "Professor" Snape was certainly in attendance.

"I don't see why I need to explain myself to you." She was ten years from being his student, damn it. "I'm sorry if I alarmed you, but it's really none of your business."

She grit her teeth as his fingers bit into her shoulder. "Then perhaps you might explain yourself to your two hysterical *friends*," he hissed, "or does 'after-the-war bad' not mean anything to you?"

"Oh. Oh, dear. Oh, *damn*."

AN: See, I *can* keep my word! The 'real' chapter is up before close of business. I hope you've enjoyed; Hermione *will* be explaining herself in the next batch! Thank you and if possible, please leave a small token in the review box.

Mud-slinging

Chapter 13 of 20

In which various things fly through the air.

Mud-slinging

He hadn't expected irritation. Contrition, perhaps, or denial. But not irritation.

"*Harry*," she muttered darkly, stalking out of the bathroom. "Harry and his damned mouth and his bloody presumption that he knows me better than I do." Snape followed, curious, but remained in the doorway when she began flicking her wand. Her Kneazle-beast also chose prudence and abandoned the field of fire.

"I *told* him," she continued, banishing take-away cartons to a rubbish bin. "I *told* him I was fine. I *told* him I was eating. Hell, he sat across the damn table and watched me do it! Bloody prat!"

"Have you quite finished your tantrum?" he drawled when he sensed a lull in the cleaning storm.

Hermione shot him an evil glare. "No. And it's my flat. You don't like my 'tantrum', then you can just bugger off." Several good-sized granite stelae whizzed past to settle in cases next to the wall.

"You will explain yourself, Miss Granger," he said stiffly, "before I, as you say, 'bugger off.'"

"Why?" she demanded, hands on hips. "We aren't friends. You don't even like me. Unless," she added nastily, continuing her work, "I'm only half-dressed. Perhaps I should strip before we talk?"

"You," Severus informed her, color mottling his face, "are an appallingly rude child."

"So are you," she shot back.

"Why are you avoiding the question?"

"Why are you asking it?"

"I'm entitled—"

"To *nothing*." She cut him off sharply. "You made it quite clear that you wanted nothing to do with me unless it involved a little grey shirt and a lot of ogling. Maybe I should just give you a smutty photo. Then you and your hand could ogle all you like without bothering me. Tell me, is cotton a requirement, or am I allowed a bit of lace?"

Livid was a vast understatement. Crossing the room with loping strides, Snape seized her shoulders and shook. "Stop this immediately, Granger."

For his trouble, he found himself flung back in the air, spine narrowly missing being cracked against the granite slabs leaning against the wall. Hermione towered over him, wand brandished. "No one," she said, steel in her voice. "*No one* touches me, Severus Snape." A deep, calming breath. "You don't want me; that's fine. We'll both live. But you've no justification for waltzing into my home and playing the self-righteous prig. And even less for trying to manhandle me."

Uncracked spine notwithstanding, Severus was not in the best shape of his life as he tried to force the spots in his vision to retreat back into his head. He heard Hermione's words dimly as he concentrated on this task— a futile exercise, as the spots merely metamorphosed into an ear-ringing headache. But he thought (insofar as it was possible to think) she required a reply, so he muttered thickly, "You hit me first."

He didn't even try to process whatever reply she might have made, as it seemed the spots had regrouped and multiplied, blacking out his vision entirely.

AN: Okay, I admit it: I lied. I said Hermione was going to explain herself in this installment. And she didn't. She got all contrary and tempermental with me. *sigh* But I thought I'd best get out what I had rather than make you wait until I managed to get her sorted. Apologies! I hope it was still enjoyable. -_-; And please leave a small token in the review box, if you have a chance. Thank you!

Foundations

Chapter 14 of 20

Severus and Hermione begin to talk—this time without flying objects.

Foundations

"Too damn old for this," he grated as a truly miserable headache heralded his return to consciousness.

"Never too old for anything until you're dead," a feminine voice said crisply. A damp, herb-scented cloth was draped over his forehead, and the pounding receded. "Though I agree this was overdoing it a bit. I wouldn't've given you a concussion, you see, if we'd just been yelling at each other. But when you grabbed me... well, you just pushed all the wrong buttons. I overreacted; I apologise for that. Though you shouldn't've grabbed like that in any case."

"Now who's acting self-righteous?"

It was probably a good thing that he couldn't see her smirk at his comment. Typical Snape, shifting the blame—or at least the focus—onto someone else. But she was *not* going to let him. While she did feel a *little* guilty at the strength of her wandless magic, patching him back up repaid *that* debt. He should know better than to try force on anyone, let alone a woman with a post-war hair trigger.

But she was baffled trying to explain his presence here at all. If only he'd answer the damn question of *why* he was *here*!

"It's a perfectly valid point," she said mildly. "It's not nice to hit girls, if you recall. I apologised for what I felt sorry for; I'm *not* sorry for hitting you back, just for hitting you harder than I ought. And I won't lie to you and say I am."

Severus's lips twitched. "Point conceded."

"Thank you." Hermione shifted her balance to sit Indian-style by the couch where she'd put him. "Now let's get down to brass tacks: Why are you so bloody insistent on knowing 'what's going on'? Tell me that and I may actually explain."

"I... was worried."

The look she gave him was blatantly incredulous. "You," she reiterated flatly. "Were worried. About me. Because of a single, overheard conversation." She shook her head disbelievingly. "You've got balls to expect me to believe that one." Hermione took in his scowl. "Don't give me that. We've barely been acquaintances for the last several years—less than that for the past few months. You couldn't be arsed to tell me 'Good morning', let alone anything more."

"So why am I here, then?" he asked bitingly.

"No idea. Your mind works in ways I wouldn't even want to consider trying to understand."

"Then we are at an impasse," Severus said stiffly. "You will not speak without knowing my motive, yet you won't believe me when I tell you."

"Again, why the hell should I?" Hermione snapped back. "You've never given me the least reason to."

"Ah. And my past record means I am inherently untrustworthy."

"You mean your *recent* record. I don't give a damn what you were doing thirty years ago, or even twenty. For the last *ten*, you've made it emphatically clear that you care fuck-all for the rest of the world—including me—even if you did save it."

Snape silenced before he could begin to refute her accusation. She was right. His own behaviours hadn't changed much since Hogwarts—and indignation about his 'probation' often made him even more acidic. In sharp, bleak contrast were Granger's actions: a thousand instances of respect, courtesy... the occasional smile, the odd conversation. And yes, the physical assaults. They were due to anger and temper... and for something he'd *done*. Not because she thought him disgusting or inferior or detestable. And her grudges were honest, never hiding behind hypocritical smiles. He always knew where he stood with her...

"You're right," he said simply.

Hermione gaped. Had she heard him correctly? Had *Severus Snape* just admitted that *she* was *right*? Perhaps she'd banged his head harder than she thought. Or the herbs she'd put in the healing potion were off. She surreptitiously sniffed the corner of the cloth she'd placed over his forehead and eyes. No, it was fine; he should be in full form within another minute. For that matter, he ought to be upright and frothing at the mouth already.

She shot another glance at the man. And realized that the cloth she'd snatched from her ragbag was that bloody grey shirt.

"Stop hovering, Granger," Snape muttered, and Hermione started back.

"How—?"

His lips twisted slightly. "Your hair precedes you," he explained dryly. "As my nose does me."

"Oh." She reddened.

He made an odd sound, somewhere between a growl and a sigh and moved to pull the cloth from his face. Hermione found herself watching his hand, which appeared to her in odd, stark relief; it was covered with various scars, scars she imagined were more benign than any others he carried. The round splatters, smooth-shining swathes, and hair-thin lines of thousands of potions' worth of simple slips and misjudgments.

"Hermione Granger." Seated properly on the couch, hand dangling the damp T-shirt, Severus gazed, eyes expressionless, at the younger woman. She watched him back, her expression a mix of curiosity and incredulity... and something else.

"Do you have any idea, Miss Granger, how many people have ever given more than a Cruciatus-laden damn about me?" He continued before she could answer. "One. And that 'one' never understood, never *tried* to understand, and never, *ever*, even tried to forgive.

"So is it any wonder that I 'care fuck-all' for a world that has made its opinion of me so abundantly clear?"

"I see," Hermione said quietly. "Do you." His voice was neutral.

"Do you know how many times a child needs to be beaten before he realizes his parents will never love him? Or how many times a man must hear it before he realizes 'I want you' *always* means 'I want something from you'?"

"'Caring' has never meant anything other than giving someone my feelings to be held as a whip over my head. I have chosen to minimize the damage."

"Then why—"

"Because. I. was. worried." Each word crisply bitten off.

Hermione suddenly found his explanation far more possible.

AN: This'll be the last for a while—though not the end, certainly. But RL's smacking me upside the head with several matters, and any writing time is going to be devoted to an original short(s?) in hopes of getting a spot in an anthology. (*^_^* Fingers crossed!)

mea culpa

Chapter 15 of 20

Hermione finally decides to answer Severus's question.

mea culpa

A sigh as Hermione lifted herself onto the couch beside him. "Well, you're good at giving the impression that *you* don't give a damn; I'll say that much." She rubbed an ache in her neck; old scars were a bitch as she got older. "I'm sorry that you felt you had to worry; I'm all right, really, just a bit overworked. *Mea culpa* entirely."

Probably better to explain herself rather than try to probe further; he'd simply hedgehog if she pried. It was incredible that he'd said so much already. Besides, she knew he'd keep her private details to himself.

"What the boys are worried about... well, it's only related in a diagonal sort of way. I get... overinvolved in my work, always have. But normally, like now, I know how far I can push myself. I may look ghastly right now, but I'll be fine after a bit of vacation. Some food and sleep and job well done.

"But..." Hermione leaned back to stare at the ceiling. How much to say, how much not...? "After the war..." she trailed off again.

"Minerva explained your 'volunteering,'" Snape said quietly.

She flashed him a startled look. "Oh. Well," she added lamely.

Far more difficult to begin than she'd thought. But then, everybody who ought to know already did; she'd never had to say it out, even if she'd come to terms with it.

"I... had nightmares," she said abruptly. "Dark, terrifying nightmares. I'd guess you know the kind." She kept her eyes on the ceiling. "I felt alone in a crowd. I hated seeing the graves, but I continued to go see them. I felt it was my fault. Often, I felt that I really *was* a worthless Mudblood.

"I knew it wasn't true. But that didn't change how I *felt*."

She didn't look at him. He watched her carefully.

"I knew what it was," she continued. "PTSD, the psychologists call it. But wizards don't have psychologists, do they? So I put myself to work; it was the one way I could chuck the whole mess at the door. I went from hospital to Hogwarts to library to wherever. Wrapped up in a project, I was complete again, useful, worthy.

"I used work to avoid thinking, feeling, dreaming. Sleeping was too difficult, might as well work. Eating gave me time to think again, better to avoid it as much as possible."

"You stopped eating," Snape repeated flatly. How could anyone have missed it? Hermione Granger was surrounded by friends, admirers... hell, even enemies.

"More or less," she agreed. "I hurt so much already, what were a few hunger pangs in addition? I told myself I'd eat later, when I had time.

"Later rarely came. I lost... oh, a few stone, at least; I wasn't paying attention. And neither was anyone else, wrapped up in their own grief and guilt and relief. They never noticed when I 'disappeared'; I was always 'somewhere about,' 'making myself useful.'

"I kept you company quite often."

"I never knew." He felt obscurely guilty, as though, even unconscious, he should have sensed her presence, known something was wrong.

Hermione shrugged. "Not really any reason for you to. You're no more obliged to me than anyone else who looked after you. If anything, I was obliged to you." She finally turned her eyes to him.

He stared at her in consternation, wondering just exactly what she meant.

"You reminded me," she said quietly, answering the unspoken question. "Reminded me of... many things, I suppose, but really that... now that it was over... the truth was what was important."

Severus couldn't reply, his mind trying to make sense of what she was telling him. His thumbs unconsciously worked the grey fabric still in his hands. Her own hand reached over, stilled the movement.

"You did so much for us, so much that was hidden, that none of us might ever know, but that you deserved to be honoured for. I had no right to tell your story, but I could tell mine, how much—how little—I actually did, and let people make their opinion from *fact*, not... not lionizing yellow journalism.

"I began my book because of you."

The rest of her story was easier to tell. Hermione told Severus of the hours she spent—many in his hospital room—writing furiously everything she remembered from her first visit from Hagrid. Even more hours revising what she had written under the influence of his undeniably critical presence—conscious or otherwise.

The boys had emerged, finally, from their grief and shock to realize the state their friend was in. They hadn't been able to do much more than force her to eat decently, but that was enough.

Enough to see her through the book and its intertwined, healing catharsis.

Small Steps

Chapter 16 of 20

Hermione finishes her history, and the two begin again with the present.

Small Steps

"Potter and Weasley should be hexed."

The comment startled a huff of amusement from her. "They were *children*, just as I was; they could hardly be expected to recognize and treat trauma while suffering it themselves."

"Very well; Minerva and *Arthur* Weasley should be hexed."

Hermione tried to stifle her grin. "It's long since done with, Severus. I've made my peace with it all. Here I am, after all—a little dishevelled, perhaps, but here, just as you are."

"If *I'm* your model," Severus drawled, "*you must* be cracked."

His lips quirked as Hermione's full laugh echoed throughout the flat.

"Well," Hermione said awkwardly, "that's it, really."

"Quite," Snape agreed tersely—and no less awkwardly, if one knew what to look for. Long fingers slowly manipulated grey fabric. He wished he could change the past, but that was a long-familiar, almost comfortable feeling, and he was well aware of its futility. He was appalled, almost furious, at the inattention of the people around her. Minerva, at the very least... her *job* had been to protect the children. He'd thought he could safely leave that charge in her hands.

And she'd nearly let this brilliant light put itself out.

Anger was futile, he'd learned. What mattered was the immediate. "Come," he ordered imperiously, and such was old habit that Hermione was almost instantly on her feet.

"Where?" she asked baldly. "Why?"

"You obviously require someone to look after you," he replied, using that (rather annoying) trick of looking down his nose.

She gave him a wry look. "Says the man recovering from a concussion."

He said nothing, merely raising an eyebrow and summoning her cloak.

She allowed him to settle it over her shoulders, and added, indicating the grey swatch still in hand, "You should leave the shirt here."

Overpowering sunlight made Hermione blink, and she found herself acutely aware of the solid presence of the man beside her, his hand at her back guiding her down the street. He said nothing as they walked, as Hermione absorbed the light and crisp air, as she realized they were heading towards the nearest Apparition point—a fair distance, with the wards she had in place.

She allowed herself to dream, to move his arm around her waist, his warmth alongside hers. Her head against his shoulder. The romantic dreams, she realized with exasperation, of a love-sick girl.

Still... she dreamed.

Hermione's expression became vague, and Severus wondered what she was thinking of. The research that had filled her recent life? Details of the past that she hadn't shared with him? His lips twisted in self-mockery; for all he knew, she might simply be dreaming of a large plate of bangers and mash.

What *did* he know, after all—what had *hetried* to know, before that sharp shock of sexual awareness weeks before? She'd been a simple, invariable constant at the edge of his life. Now... he was seeing in her a woman he could truly respect, could possibly...

...respect.

Inverse Function

Chapter 17 of 20

A change of environment becomes a change in dynamics. A change in dynamics becomes a change in perspectives.
And changes in perspective are always... interesting.

Inverse Function

Spinner's End was entirely new to Hermione, and though the outside was dreary with flaking paint and sagging architecture, the inside...

She made a beeline for the books. The narrow rooms were crammed with them: books on shelves, books on tables, books on chairs. In fact, the majority of the furniture seemed to exist solely to have somewhere other than the floor to put books.

And she could only guess what he had upstairs.

Snape leaned against the doorframe, lips twitching. "If, perhaps, you could *postpone* the orgasm?" he drawled sardonically.

He'd never before realized that even *hands* could blush.

Snape had steered her firmly into a chair next to the table and, with the authority of hundreds of Potions' classes, kept her there as he manipulated various utensils and appliances with an ease that was... well, perhaps not so surprising in a Potions Master, but certainly surprising in a man. In Hermione's experience, men handled food only under pain of utter starvation. Otherwise, they had mothers or wives or house elves or the local take-away.

They did *not* have well-lit, well-stocked kitchens with dishes that were almost painfully clean.

Nor did they have long, slender fingers that...

Oh, hell.

He had brought her to his home. (Such as it was.) Because of this odd, implacable urge to look after her—a silly whisper in his mind that wanted him to make sure she didn't... What? Disappear? Kill herself? Something in his brain was being absurdly melodramatic. She might be a little haggard, but he'd managed the same on occasion. And a ghost of a headache reminded him that she was still entirely capable.

So what was he trying to prove? And to whom?

She appeared completely comfortable there at the table, head nestled upon her arms. Comfortable... and asleep.

He indulged himself—and his melodrama. He could make excuses, but what was the point? Snape knew himself well enough to force himself to admit that when he carried Hermione upstairs the ordinary way, it was because he wanted to.

Because she felt good against him. Because she trusted him enough to sleep this deeply. Because her hair teased his nose. Because he could imagine slipping into his bed beside her.

Because neither of them would do so when she was awake.

He eased her shoes off and imagined how she would look just now in that short, grey shirt.

Cypress. The marvellously green scent of cypress. Hermione wriggled a little, burying her nose in her pillow. With undertones of...

Wait.

Her bed didn't smell of cypress. Nothing she owned smelled of cypress. Her eyes shot open.

The bed was narrow—and otherwise unoccupied. Hermione was grateful for this as her cheeks warmed; she knew where she'd been—and where she must be.

She had fallen asleep. Severus Snape had been making her dinner—in *his house*—and she'd fallen asleep like a child allowed to stay up too late. And he'd obviously tucked her into bed—like a child.

Very little could dampen Hermione's curiosity—even mortification merely delayed it slightly. While not so rude as to open drawers or the wardrobe, Hermione investigated the—*his*—room avidly. A mundane lamp upon a bedside table provided light. Bookshelves again, floor to ceiling, crammed full of all sorts and sizes. What little could be seen of the walls was a deep blue-green, against which the mahogany furniture gleamed. Everything tidied away—was that normal or on her account?

There were no pictures. Nor any memorabilia. Looking about, Hermione came to realize that probably there was nothing he wanted to remember.

I have chosen to minimize the damage.

His parents—who had alternately neglected and abused him, from what little Harry had said. Dumbledore—who had delicately calculated precisely how far he could be trusted and used without breaking. The Malfoys—willing to sacrifice him for their family's survival.

Lily Evans—who had never tried to understand.

Or forgive.

A lack of photographs was hardly surprising then. After all, even self-flagellation had limits—and this room, comfortable and close, was clearly his sanctuary.

How many people, Hermione wondered, fingers smoothing the pillow, *have ever called him Severus? Or even wanted to?*

The mind was a treacherous thing; the libido even more so. Severus had finished cooking and settled down with a book in his favourite chair. And despite his best attempts, images of Hermione played through his brain.

The pale length of her legs that night when she'd answered the door—the curves of hip and thigh. In her office when he'd returned the shirt, tight-laced and tautly controlled. In his bed, face framed by masses of dark-honey hair. And he could all too easily see his fingers trailing along her body, changing her complexion from warm ivory to heated crimson.

His mind's scene shifted, and he was behind her, hands grasping tightly at her waist, face pressed to the base of her neck. One of her hands clasped the back of his head. The other covered his own, encouraging its possessive grip to the point where she would certainly have bruises. And the sounds she made... surely she would be as vocal here...?

Her head turned; he could see the desire in her eyes—for him alone—a brief moment before they closed the distance between them. And he knew how she tasted... Her hand fisted in his hair...

Hermione...

ANs: Readers who are paying particularly close attention (and I can't think why you should be) will notice that Snape has been mystically moved back into Spinner's End. I did this for a few reasons, which really don't make a difference one way or the other. In any case, I'll make a retroactive change if I get around to it.

And I blame Snape entirely for the last two drabbles. And for Occluding me after the last one.

Offerings placed in the review box are, as always, vastly appreciated.

A Touch of the Blues

Chapter 18 of 20

A slight hitch in the proceedings before ending up back where we started—with a few tiny differences.

A Touch of the Blues

Hermione paused uncertainly at the foot of the stairs. Where should she go? Back to the kitchen? She certainly didn't want to be (accused of) snooping. Hearing noises, she decided to follow them; he *was* the only other person in the house... wasn't he?

An open door disclosed another flight of stairs... then an absolutely beautiful potions laboratory.

And a Master at work.

Back and forth; forward, back. A handful here, a spoonful there. Dicing with quick, exact strokes. Stirring swiftly, lips counting silently. The heavy thrill of magic over all.

A beautiful dance, choreographed by the potion, brilliantly executed.

He knew she was there. The rustle of her robes, the pale round of her face as she hovered in the doorway. The indefinable air of *her* that plucked at his senses.

His nerves vibrated along his spine, humming with that awareness. Only his pride... the one thing he had managed to keep intact over the years ...kept his hands steady and his attention on the delicate brewing. Snape would be damned before he let *anything* cause him to make a mistake with such a difficult potion.

So, naturally, he mucked up the simple burn salve in the next cauldron.

Hermione would *never* have expected Severus Snape to make a brewing mistake, and so her reflexes were perhaps not what they could have been. Severus's own *were* all they could have been, but after decades of brewing alone, he had a slightly different priority: to wit, the other, more volatile potion. And... perhaps ...he had a subconscious expectation that Hermione Granger could take care of herself.

Both sets of expectations were proved wrong as the salve erupted like a miniature Vesuvius.

And the result was both witch and wizard deep-dyed a vivid shade of indigo blue from head to toe.

Hermione probably would have been able to handle surprise or shock or concern, even pain or panic. But the expression on his face was pure, unadulterated Snape: deeply annoyed disgust. And at the sight of it, she simply couldn't help herself.

Hermione began to giggle. Her giggles evolved into full laughter. Laughter...

...froze into tense silence. Severus's disgust had twisted into flashes of mortification, anger... hurt? ...at the sound of her amusement. And just as quickly they were replaced by a story mask she was all too familiar with.

He said nothing, merely began to tidy up the extensive mess.

"Leave it." The sharp command stung, and Hermione's wand involuntarily jerked back before she could help. Silence reigned as Severus briskly spun the viscous liquid back into the cauldron for disposal and completed the final steps of his experiment.

He ignored his indigo hands... and the woman who had retreated to sit on the stairs.

Only when he had finished did she again come forward, around the table to take his hand. "Severus," she said, and he started at the name, "Severus, we're both *blue*. Blueberry blue." Her fingers brushed over his cheek and gently brought him to face her.

Hermione wondered if apologies carried any weight with Severus. Did they ring hollow with insincerity, or have all the more impact from never having been applied to him? She *was* sorry; she'd made him feel the fool... no matter her intentions ...and after a lifetime of the same...

But still... the situation wasn't without humour. After all, "Severus, we're both *blue*. Blueberry blue." *Like Third-Year students after Potions class mid-year.*

An apology? No. Nor any excuses. But perhaps the chance for her to feel the fool. Again.

Her hands framed his face as she leaned over to kiss him gently.

For several moments, Severus's brain simply refused to process the pressure of Hermione's lips against his, semi-coherent thought re-engaging only when she pulled back from her tentative gesture. So close to him... so...

"You are indeed blue," he remarked, pushing back an errant indigo curl.

"*Very* blue," she agreed with a tiny flash of startlingly white teeth. "Almost purple."

"A stupid mistake."

She shook her head. "I should've known better than to distract you."

"You are very distracting," he agreed gravely, thumb tracing soft lips.

Hermione couldn't help it; she dimpled, her deep flush masked by her indigo complexion.

It was strange, almost absurd, how natural she looked in his library. But then, 'Hermione' and 'books' were nearly synonymous, so perhaps it wasn't as odd as it felt to see her, head leaning to one side, surrounded by his stacks of texts, hair glinting wildly in the firelight. Bare feet tucked up like a child's, peeking from the hem of her robes.

The last witch to sit there had been ramrod stiff with bitter resentment. Eileen Prince, with the same fierce pride she'd passed down to her son... and the same abysmal judgment when it came to bridge-burning choices.

What would Hermione have done? Severus asked himself. Disowned, ostracized from magical society, shackled to a man she despised, no viable Muggle skills... and a young boy to raise.

Hermione... would have done what his mother had been too proud to do... learned everything she could about the Muggle world until she knew they could survive. Then taken her son and left.

He couldn't hate Eileen; she'd done her best for him, giving him all she had left... a name and heritage to be proud of.

But... as a small, unhappy boy, he'd have wished for a mother like Hermione.

Snape choked on his tea, and began cursing quietly at a mind that was apparently as treacherous as Dumbledore's. It wasn't enough to be having sexual fantasies about a woman young enough to be his daughter, no. It seemed he needed to imagine saccharine domesticity as well.

Now he knew what celibacy accomplished: a mind drunk on the memory of... what? *Two* kisses? ...to the point where it leapt forward of its own accord to damn foolish nonsense. He'd not even slept with the girl yet.

He wanted to. But what did he want besides?

What else did *she* want?

Mm, *déjà vu*... or was that *'déjà senti'*? Hermione revelled in the cypress scent and the warmth, wriggling to take advantage of... the... softness...

That wasn't soft. And that wasn't the wall she was tucked against. And now that she thought about it, that was an impressive snore sounding in her ear and a hand definitely not her own tucked just under her breast... a position oddly both intimate and chaste.

Though *that* could hardly be called 'chaste' by any stretch of the imagination.

Still, what a lovely way to awaken, feeling both coddled and desired... and by Severus Snape.

In a case like this, does one bless or curse indulging one's bloody melodramatic streak? Severus wasn't entirely sure. Certainly, the benefits shouldn't be discounted; the feel of Granger in his arms... *in my bed* ...the knowing that she was looked-after. The delusions that she'd be there again in nights to come.

But then, it might have been better not to know what he was missing. And he'd neglected to remember certain biological facts, especially considering that she was now snuggled tight against him, and when she woke...

He'd probably be lucky if a right hook was all he got.

AN: Finally, the nightshirt returns! (In a manner of speaking, since I wasn't actually able to work the shirt in this time, to my disappointment.) Still, I've managed a decent-sized chunk this time, which I hope has managed to please. Let's see... the first drabble owes its visual to a scene from another Rickman film, *Blow Dry* (enjoyable Brit crack-film). And as for the next to last drabble... Um, yes, please. *grin*

If so inclined, please leave a token in the review box. (Since, not being JKR, I don't get paid in actual coin of the realm. ^_^)

Greeting the Day

Chapter 19 of 20

Hermione deals with waking up next to Severus... and with meeting up with the boys.

Greeting the Day

"You'll have to take care of that yourself." Hermione's voice held a hint of amusement as she rolled over— carefully, thank the gods —and faced him. Seeing his expression, she added carefully, "I'm flattered— and tempted —but we're hardly randy teenagers or characters in a romance novel. I don't think we need the complications just yet."

Severus acknowledged her logic, but... "You were ready to jump me a month ago," he pointed out.

"Yes, and look how well *that* turned out." She smiled and, to his shock, planted a saucy kiss on the bridge of his nose before sitting up.

Severus watched Hermione in bemusement as she rose and began to don the clothes he'd (respectfully) removed or transfigured when he'd brought her up last night. She apparently liked to stretch in the morning, her body seeming impossibly long as she balanced on her toes, arms reaching for the ceiling. Absently, she pushed her hair out of her face, but without pins it merely sprang back into its cloud around her.

Either way, it wasn't... helping matters.

Still, she appeared in far better form than she'd been in *yesterday* morning, and that pleased him more than he would have expected.

Oh, that's lovely. Buttoning up her robes, Hermione watched Severus toss back the covers and swing his feet over the edge of the bed. Mm, *very* lovely. He apparently preferred black silk pyjama pants— and that left his lean torso (and decidedly skinny arms) nicely bare.

"No grey nightshirt?" she asked, grinning, slipping her wand into its sheath.

"I don't own grey clothes," he replied with a slight, puzzling edge that then disappeared. "And pants are most practical in the event of emergencies." He vanished into the bathroom.

'Emergencies...' *A habit, then, from the bad old days* Hermione determined, sobering.

"So... what now?"

Severus looked up from breakfast, blinking at Hermione's bluntness. "We return to bed and shag like bunnies?" he suggested.

He was rewarded with laughter. "I already said no, demon," she grinned.

He shrugged. "Nothing ventured..."

"I don't even know your middle name," she remarked.

Severus's face twisted with incredulity. "What's that to do with anything?" She raised an eyebrow. "Claudius," he sighed.

"*Another* Roman emperor."

"My turn." At her expectant look, he asked, "What's your darkest fantasy?"

"Doing it in a room with no lights," she answered blithely. At his nonplussed look, she added, "You *said* 'darkest.'"

Both Severus and Hermione were due at the Ministry. For once, Severus didn't mind so much, for Hermione persuaded him to accompany her for her change of clothes, and then they *walked* to the Ministry. Together.

It was a novel experience.

As was her insouciance in the face of the whispers that greeted them. Everyone had always *cared* about being seen with him. Hermione didn't appear to give a damn—

except perhaps for the dimwitted duo attempting to lurk behind a column.

Now *they*, unfortunately, might actually be able to toss a *Finite Incantatem* into the whole... whatever this was.

"Is he why?"

Hermione glanced up from her desk, frowning. "You're being abstruse, Harry. Is 'he'— I *assume* you mean Severus —the reason for what?" She knew precisely what he meant, actually, but damned if she'd make it easy for him.

"Is he why you've been... off... this month?" Ron was blatantly uncomfortable.

She growled irritably. "No, Severus is *not* the reason I've been 'off,' as you so quaintly put it. If you *must* know, he's the reason I had a good dinner, a good breakfast, and a bloody good night's sleep in between."

Green didn't look well with freckles.

"Your *concern* is misdirected." Hermione's annoyance with her two friends returned ten-fold. "It might've been touching, to know you *were* worrying about me. Sweet, even. *But,*" her eyes turned flinty, "I *do not* appreciate being discussed behind my back by two Nosy Parkers who apparently can't be arsed to ~~task~~ *ask* me *themselves* if something's wrong!"

Even her hair seemed to quiver with anger. "Of the three of you, it was *Severus Snape* who *bothered* to talk to me and *make sure* I was okay! And *now* you come hurling accusations!

"Take a long, hard look in the mirror first, boys."

Ron had the grace to look abashed. Harry merely became mulish.

"He's old enough to be your *father*," he said in disgust. Harry could manage sympathy and respect, but damned if he'd ever *like* Snape. And now...

"*Beside* the point," Hermione replied icily. "We're *both* well past the age of consent."

"I'd've thought he was well past—" Harry's heated reply was quickly smothered by Ron's hand as the redhead began dragging him more or less bodily out of the office.

"Talk t'you later, yeah, Mione?" he threw back hurriedly. Years of chess and Aurory had instilled *some* sense of strategy.

AN: Nothing much today; just enjoy, and, if possible, leave a token in the little box. Cheers!

Work Ethics

Chapter 20 of 20

A day at the Ministry involves quite a lot: interacting with coworkers, writing reports, reading articles... and all with the volatility of Severus Snape.

Work Ethics

"Seen enough?" Hermione queried the thin air. It shimmered slightly, and Severus appeared.

"You knew?" She gave him a *look*, and he gestured, dismissing the issue. Stupid question. Of course she'd have her office properly warded.

She Beckoned a chair from her cupboard for him. "I knew you'd slipped in with the boys. I'm not quite certain what you intended to accomplish. If you wanted to know what they thought— I guess you've been answered. Also if you wanted to know what I'd say to them. Whether I'd say something else behind your back? I'd say you missed your mark."

"*You* wouldn't talk behind my back," Severus said with certainty, adding, "You insult me perfectly well to my face."

Hermione smiled. "True. But that doesn't answer the question."

No point pretending to be obtuse. "Hermione, how much does their... approval mean to you?"

She, too, knew better than to pretend, and sobered. "I... don't know," she answered slowly. "If their objections were reasonable, then quite a bit, I'd say. But as it is... I won't change my mind simply because they don't *like* you." She tried a small grin. "*They're* not the ones who'd be sleeping with you, after all."

"I don't care to repeat my mistakes, Hermione."

She sighed, leaning back in her chair. "I don't care to be someone who'd cause you to. And..." Hermione debated her next words. "I'm not Lily Evans, Severus. Nor am I some thoughtless, self-absorbed teenager, for all that I'm twenty years your junior. I'd... hope that you don't confuse me with either."

Cinnamon eyes met his own steadily, though her cheeks were flushed. Her clock ticked by long seconds before he answered. "No. No, you aren't," he said softly. "You are

Hermione Granger, who makes up her own bloody mind about everything.”

He looked quite comfortable there, lying along the transfigured couch, reading her copy of *Creatures Quarterly*. Severus had no particular place to be, it seemed, until his services were called for by memo-plane, and he had remained in her office while she worked.

And for once, her mind was not on her work. Instead, it was involved in tossing those thick, woolen robes to the floor, his white linen shirt over the couch back, shoes and trousers into a corner... pinning his wrists to the cushions...

When lunchtime came, the beans that her clock chucked at her were entirely superfluous.

She might think him indifferent, but it was only his concentration on the disgusting pictures of furry Siberian frost slugs that kept Severus upon the couch— instead of across the room, pressing the witch hard against her desk. He doubted she'd appreciate it— during working hours, anyway.

But it wasn't difficult to imagine her sprawled over the blotter, top buttons undone and her breasts moving freely while her hands grasped for his hips...

Slugs. Yes. He was fascinated by oozy, fur-covered slugs.

...skirts hiked up about her waist, legs wrapping around...

Slugs, damn it! The article was about slugs!

Severus heard the quill scritch into its stand and looked up to find her eyes on him— a reflection of his own desire. But still uncertain, he raised himself on one elbow, never once breaking the connection as he moved carefully, deliberately. She, in turn, rose slowly from her seat.

Thump thump thump! “Mione? You up for lunch?” Weasley's brassy tones screeched through the door, shattering all possibilities.

“Bloody bugging bollocks on a stick!” he swore vehemently.

Hermione smiled apologetically, then strode toward the door, magically unlocking it. Snape watched, intent and indecisive. Then, eyes narrowed and glimmering, he pounced.

A shrill screech echoed from behind Hermione's office door. “Mione?” Ron called, alarmed. “*Mione?*” No answer— except for more choked screams. Frantic, Ron flashed off a Patronus to fetch Harry and went for the door.

Like most Government doors, it stuck. “*Stop it! No, please, stop!*” Ron applied force, smashing it open just as Harry arrived. The two stumbled into the room, wands brandished.

They found Snape there, kneeling atop their friend, hands busy at her waist.

Hermione, tears leaking from her eyes, was... laughing. “Curse it, Severus, I nearly wet myself.”

Severus merely smirked at the boys' gobsmacked expressions.

“Snape!” Potter's roar could probably be heard down in the lowest Unspeakable level of the Ministry. Weasley merely gaped unbecomingly.

Hermione, raising herself on one arm, glanced back and forth between the three men. “Ah,” she said in perfect comprehension. She gave Severus a gimlet glare. “Universal fairness being what it is, *you* probably aren't ticklish whatsoever, are you?”

“I couldn't possibly comment,” he replied loftily. Standing, he offered his hand. Silghtly dubious, she allowed him to help her to her feet.

“*Later,*” she hissed, seeing Harry's near-purple face.

As urbane as any Malfoy, Snape drawled, “I certainly hope so.”