

Starlings

by neelix

A song-inspired one-shot.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: I was inspired to write this silly thing when listening to a beautiful song, 'Starlings', by the British band Elbow.

None of the characters belong to me except the truly shocking Mr Updike.

Thanks to kizzy7 for beta'ing like Speedy Gonzales.

Severus paced impatiently in the outer office, straining his ears to try and catch the mumbling voices behind the very closed oak double-doors. Presently, he paused with bated breath as he heard the click, click, click of stiletto-heeled footsteps approaching the door from the other side. The door opened a fraction, and Hermione Granger slipped her svelte frame between the gap, closing it with her back to the door and a rueful smile on her face. The sheaf of parchment she was holding was clutched tightly to her chest, and she paused slightly before approaching her former professor and holding the bundle out for him to take.

'I'm so sorry, sir.' Hermione bit her lip as she stared at his face for signs of anger.

Severus sighed, running his hand through his long, dark hair before taking the parchment roughly from her, causing her to gasp slightly.

'Forgive me, Miss Granger. I should not take my frustrations out on you,' he mumbled, his gaze dropping to her stiletto-clad feet. With a slight quirk of his eyebrow, he noticed the shoes were red today, and he wondered absently how many pairs she actually owned. Each time that he paid her boss a visit, they were a different colour.

'What was his excuse this time?' he asked resignedly.

Hermione let out an unladylike snort and then covered her mouth with her hand. 'Oh my goodness!' she exclaimed, blushing.

Severus Snape smirked at his ex-student's faux pas. It was the first time she had let her professional demeanour slip since he had started to visit the publishing house four months ago, and it gave him hope that she perhaps wasn't as tight-laced as she would have him believe.

'Well?' Severus said again.

'I beg your pardon?' Hermione blinked at him a few times as she tried to remember the original question.

'Updike's excuse for not reading my work, Miss Granger,' Severus said slowly.

'Oh, that.' Hermione arranged her face back to one portraying intelligent efficiency. 'Mr Updike has a business lunch to attend.'

'And you, Miss Granger? Will you be attending this lunch?' Severus let his voice drop slightly, letting it take on a husky and almost seductive quality.

Hermione blushed from her neck upwards until her cheeks began to burn a little. With a small, nervous laugh, she shook her head.

'No. I'll be having my lunch on the bench in the park, just as I always do.'

She stared at Severus for a moment, wondering why on earth she had felt the need to divulge her lunchtime routine and what had made her think that he might have been one bit interested. Behind her, the oak doors swung open, interrupting her thoughts. Dropping her gaze, she walked briskly back to her desk just as Wallace Updike, owner of Updike and Swallow Publishing, stepped out of his office.

'Granger.' Wallace Updike spoke like an army officer, and Hermione damn near stood to attention as he barked out her name.

'Yes, sir?' she responded.

'Thought I told you I wasn't reading his stuff today?' Updike glanced sideways to where Severus stood watching the exchange with interest and no small amount of surprise.

'I informed Professor Snape that you are otherwise engaged, Mr Updike. I believe he is just leaving.' Hermione looked at Severus pleadingly, and he nodded imperceptibly, letting her know he was taking the hint.

'Indeed. Miss Granger. A pleasure as always.' Severus bowed slightly, and Hermione bit her lip to hold in a small smirk. 'Updike.' Severus almost spat the man's name through gritted teeth, and then he turned and walked quickly down the long corridor. Hermione watched with a small feeling of triumph as his robes billowed with contempt, and her boss tried valiantly not to flinch.

Five days after his last visit to Updike and Swallow, Severus found himself lurking furtively behind a large laurel bush in the park opposite the imposing office block. The sun was shining fiercely, and he thanked the gods he had decided to leave his robes at home today. He had been waiting over twenty minutes, and sweat had started to run down his neck before remembering he was an actual wizard, and he had cast a Cooling Charm.

Patience wasn't one of Severus's virtues, despite his past life as a spy. Endless hours of waiting, watching, and listening had put him off the pastime until now. He mentally beat himself up. Why the hell he thought Hermione Granger would want to share her park bench with him at lunchtime was beyond him, but he was here now. Might as well go through with it and be hung for a lamb or a sheep or whatever it was you get hung for.

Hermione walked slowly through the park gates. She was holding a book to her nose, her feet making their journey unaided. With a jolt, Severus realised she was wearing trainers, not stilettos, and he felt a tiny bit disappointed. He had been placing bets with himself about their colour today, secretly hoping that they might be green. At that thought he had laughed at himself, for surely Hermione Granger would never, ever, wear green stilettos.

Hermione reached the park bench and lowered her book. Staring directly at the laurel bush, she waved a little and smiled before turning to sit. Opening her shoulder bag, she withdrew two packets of sandwiches (brie and salad on sundried tomato bread) and two coffees. She placed one lunch beside her, and then she slowly unwrapped her own and began to eat. After three mouthfuls, she started to giggle.

'Professor, your coffee is getting cold,' she teased, turning to stare at the bush again. The leaves shook slightly, and Hermione giggled and shrugged her shoulders before going back to her sandwich.

Severus stood behind the laurel bush with his arms crossed over his chest and his lower lip stuck out like a petulant child. The coffee smelled amazing, and the sandwich looked delicious. But he felt incredibly stupid, and he didn't know how to get out of his bush with his dignity intact. With a flash of brilliance, he bent down and grabbed a handful of weeds that were growing at the base of the laurel bush before walking purposefully over to the bench.

'Miss Granger,' he said.

'What on earth were you doing behind that bush, Professor? I saw you from my office window. You were there for almost half an hour.' Hermione smiled sweetly up at him.

'Gathering ingredients,' he murmured, holding his hand out to show Hermione the evidence of his foraging.

'Nettles?' Hermione stared at the bunch of greenery.

Severus glanced down at his hand, suddenly aware of the stinging sensation in his palm.

'Still a know-it-all, I see,' he muttered.

'Can you sit?' Hermione looked up at him, a little perplexed.

'Can I, or will I?' Severus twitched his mouth and raised his eyebrow in what he hoped was an amusing and possibly attractive manner.

'Well, I was assuming you had the nettles for a potion, sir. And the only potion I can think of that requires nettles as an ingredient,' Hermione said quietly, pausing to lift the lid of her coffee and take a sip, 'is a Boil Cure Potion.'

Severus stared down at the top of Hermione's head, watching the sun catch the highlights in her hair. *Damn clever, bloody witch*, he thought. With a flourish, he turned, lifting the coffee and sandwich and sitting firmly beside Hermione on the bench.

'Thank you for your concern, but the potion is not for myself. I assure you,' Severus murmured.

'Glad to hear it.' Hermione smiled into her sandwich, and they sat in silence as they ate.

Three months later, and the park bench lunch had become a ritual of sorts. They had started to take turns in purchasing the coffee and sandwiches, and Severus learned that Hermione favoured smoked salmon or Brie with salad and no mayonnaise, and an ordinary coffee on most days, but an occasional caramel cappuccino when she needed a pick-me-up. Today was a caramel cappuccino day if ever there was one, although Severus thought that the addition of salty tears wouldn't enhance the taste at all.

'I'm so sorry.' Hermione sniffed loudly, and Severus winced while pulling out a white handkerchief, which he had taken to putting in his inside pocket for just such an occasion.

He had remembered from Hermione's school days that she had the need to sob uncontrollably now and again, and he liked to be prepared. Plus, it made him look like a gentleman, and that was always a bonus.

'Here,' Severus said, thrusting the white cloth under Hermione's hair in the general direction of her face. 'What did he say to you this time?'

Hermione took the handkerchief gratefully, and Severus closed his eyes to hide the graphic image of her forcefully blowing her nose. He realised just in time that putting his fingers in his ears to block out the accompanying sound would ruin his gentlemanly handkerchief offering, so he resisted and tried to figure out a way of Obliviating himself

of the memory at a later date.

'He is such a horrible man,' Hermione mumbled.

'Tell me,' Severus said softly.

'I wanted a day off. He refused it for no real reason and made up some ridiculous task in the basement, which I know was never on his 'To Do' list because I make up his 'To Do' list every week. So now I have to work on my birthday, and I had such a lovely day planned.' Hermione sighed.

'I don't know why you put up with him. You don't have to, you know. You're intelligent, bright. You could do his job, for God's sake.' Severus raised his voice in Hermione's defence, and she turned, smiling at him brightly.

'I know. You're right. I would much rather be running my own bookshop, but I need to work. I need the money. But that was a lovely thing to say, Severus.' Hermione rested her hand lightly on Severus's arm and gazed at him.

Severus stared at her trainer-clad feet a little. 'Where are your other shoes?' he asked, changing the subject.

'My stilettos, you mean?' Hermione grinned. She had a feeling Severus liked her stilettos.

'Whatever you call them,' he mumbled, trying not to flush under her gaze.

'I only wear them in the office. They give me a bit of height, but they are bloody uncomfortable.' Hermione handed Severus back his handkerchief, and he stared at it in disgust.

'Please keep it,' he said.

Hermione glanced at Severus's wrinkled nose and then at the handkerchief, and she laughed. 'Thanks.'

They drifted into a comfortable silence, and Hermione let out a long sigh.

'See you, then.' She stood and walked slowly back towards the office.

'Hermione.' Severus called her back, and she paused, waiting for him to catch up.

'Yes?' She smiled at him softly.

'When is your birthday?' he asked her in a bored tone.

'It's tomorrow,' she answered with a sigh. 'Bye, Severus.'

Severus watched her, and his eyes narrowed as he followed her route and let his gaze drift up to the top floor, where he knew she would look out of the window and watch him as he walked away.

'Updike is a total bastard,' he muttered to himself.

Hermione walked into the outer office with her head down and her lips pursed. She wasn't going to let Updike know how much he had upset her. Making sure her hair was still firmly caught up behind her head, she slipped her feet into her stilettos behind her desk and waved her wand at them. She grinned to herself and wondered what Severus would think of a staunch Gryffindor wearing Slytherin green shoes.

The post arrived in a flurry of wings and hooting. The usual circulars and memos, which Hermione sorted in a flash, and two or three more personal missives addressed to the boss. One letter in particular caught Hermione's attention, and she could have sworn she was looking at Severus's spiky, spidery writing on the thick vellum envelope. Grabbing the post, Hermione walked quickly into Updike's office.

Wallace Updike sat at his desk. Large plumes of smoke curled upwards from the end of his fat Cuban cigar. As he saw Hermione enter, he brushed his handlebar moustaches softly.

'Morning, Granger,' he barked.

Hermione paused and glared at him for a split second before reapplying her mask and smiling slightly.

'Good morning, Mr Updike,' she answered brightly before placing the post on his desk in front of him.

'Coffee, Granger. There's a girl.' Updike leaned around the end of the desk and patted Hermione lightly on her grey-skirt clad bottom. Hermione froze for a split second, and Severus's words came flooding back to her.

'I think, Mr Updike, that today you can get your own coffee.' Hermione said quietly, her eyes flashing dangerously.

'What?' Updike puffed his cigar out of his mouth, and it landed with a flop onto the post. Neither of the occupants of the large office noticed as the letters started to go up in flames.

'Today is my birthday, Mr Updike. And I have just realised the best present I could give myself.' Hermione smiled at him brightly and withdrew her wand. With a flourish, Hermione conjured a piece of parchment and a quill and scribbled quickly, pondering her words for all of three seconds.

'There. That sums it up, I think.' Hermione walked around the desk and pointed her wand at the flaming post, dousing it with a quick *Aguaamenti*. She placed the parchment on top of the now soaking pile of ash, her large, round writing clearly visible.

Updike read the parchment in shock. 'You quit?'

Hermione patted her now ex-boss on the head. 'That's right, Mr Updike. Can't get anything past you, can I?'

With a smirk, Hermione walked quickly from the office, her heart beating wildly in her chest, not quite believing what she had just done. She walked right out of the building and straight across to the park, where she made her way automatically to the bench. It was a shock when she looked up to see Severus sitting there, obviously waiting for her.

She stared at him and followed his gaze. His jaw had dropped open as he took in her shoes, and Hermione's grin stretched into a hearty laugh. With an overwhelming sense of happiness, she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him soundly on the lips.

Severus was stunned. He had fully expected his bribe to Updike to work like a charm, even though it wasn't a charm. It really was just a bribe to allow Hermione the day off. He hadn't expected to be treated to her delicious ankles wrapped in his fantasy pair of stilettos, nor to have his arms full of ecstatic witch. He wasn't about to question it, however, because said witch was currently squeezing him tightly to her ample bosom, her soft hair tickling his neck and caressing the end of his nose in a way it had never

been caressed before. Severus wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist and kissed her cheek gently.

With sudden awareness and more than a little awkwardness, Hermione pulled away and slipped onto the bench beside him, staring at her feet. A telltale blush was creeping up her cheeks as she pulled her hands into her lap. With a bravery he didn't know he had, Severus took one of her hands and held it firmly in his.

'Happy Birthday, Hermione,' he whispered, staring down at her amazing shoes and feeling a twitch somewhere between his legs.

Hermione grinned, staring at her shoes as well. 'Thanks, Severus.'

Her flat had been what he had expected it to be. Feminine, neat, walls full of books. He had forgotten about the orange fur ball that shared her living space, but the animal seemed too old or too disinterested to want to sniff around him too much, and for that, he was grateful. Not that he minded cats, but half-kneazles had an intelligence he didn't quite understand.

The bedroom had been a revelation in that he hadn't expected to see it so soon, nor had he expected to be invited so eagerly beneath the covers of the soft, flower-covered duvet.

The biggest surprise was that she had happily agreed to keep her shoes on.

She was panting happily in his arms, her sweaty hair sticking in curls around her face. He turned to pin her to the mattress, and she giggled, staring up at him. Their eyes met properly for the first time, and something exploded inside him. His mouth went dry for a split second.

'I think I love you,' he murmured.

The End

Starlings by Elbow

How dare the Premier ignore my invitations?

He'll have to go

So, too, the bunch he luncheons with

It's second on my list of things to do

At the top I'm stopping by

Your place of work and acting like

I haven't dreamed of you and I

And marriage in an orange grove

You are the only thing in any room you're ever in

I'm stubborn, selfish and too old.

I sat you down and told you how

the truest love that's ever found

Is for oneself

You pulled apart my theory

With a weary and disinterested sigh

So yes I guess I'm asking you

To back a horse that's good for glue

And nothing else

But find a man that's truer than,

Find a man that needs you more than I

Sit with me a while

And let me listen to you talk about

your dreams and your obsessions

I'll be quiet and confessional

The violets explode inside me

when I meet your eyes

Then I'm spinning and I'm diving

Like a cloud of starlings

Darling is this love?