

State Secrets

by Elisabeth

Hermione tries something new to meet someone new, with extremely surprising results. Written for the 2008 Winter SS/HG Exchange, for Geminiscorp, whose prompt was: "Speed dating – do I have to say more? (Hint: silliness, snark and mayhem galore!)"

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Standard disclaimer: Making no money. Anything you recognize belongs to Ms. Rowling. And a big thank-you to fearless beta Lady_Rhian, whose comments, suggestions and pointed questions made this a much better piece than it started out to be.

With a sigh, Hermione reminded herself that Ginny was not to blame. For once.

Certainly, Ginny had a history of contributing dodgy ideas to the project of improving Hermione's social life. Like the surprise gift of Naughty Nox Knickers from Madame Malkin's Strictly Confidential Owl-Order Catalog, or the ingeniously charmed Runway Walk Heels that imparted a techno-inspired swagger to the wearer's gait. (A good look on a sulky 18-year-old out clubbing; a mortifying one when hurrying down Diagon Alley to return them before an ankle fractured.)

Yes, Ginny was a tireless advocate for Hermione's Getting Out Again and Having a Life, and she was also very good at reminding Hermione that Rose And Hugo Are Practically Grown. But this did *not* change the fact that tonight was Hermione's own idea entirely, and a fuckwitted idea it was:

Speed Dating.

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She couldn't even plead being pissed as an excuse. Stone-cold sober, with her famously incisive thinking skills, Hermione had pondered three crucial factors:

1. Her tentative desire to resume a love life after the unraveling of a 25-year marriage.
2. Her loving but nosy friends, evenly split between those who agreed with Ginny and those wishing she had a Time-Turner to make the divorce go away.
3. Her gloomy conviction that any attempt at a post-Ron romance would be met with screamingly inaccurate headlines in the next day's *Prophet*.

Obviously, the sensible remedy was to...

"Attend one of Madam Kerensa's Speed Dating parties using a glamour?" Ginny sputtered. "You must be barking!"

Hermione, who had prudently cast *Muffliato* a moment earlier, took a quick look about before muttering an *Evanescio* to dispatch the puddle that had been in Ginny's cappuccino cup a sentence ago. This Muggle espresso bar was a favorite bolt-hole for both of them, given its lack of Wizarding clientele, but one could never be too discreet.

"You're not thinking this through," Hermione said.

"I don't have to! Hermione, do you truly think speed dating is any way to meet a soul mate?"

"It's just a bit of preliminary research. Who said anything about a soul mate?"

"It's not even a good way to meet a one-off!" Ginny took a deep breath and a quick sip. "Aside from that, I thought they'd banned glamours there. Makes sense, when you think about it."

"Oh, anti-glamour spells." Hermione waved her hand dismissively. "I won't have any trouble getting round those."

Ginny gave Hermione an unusually stern look, her pink-polished fingers tapping impatiently upon the table. "All right, then. There's still the little matter of when you'll be revealing your actual identity."

"Who said anything about that?"

"That's not exactly nice," Ginny noted.

"Neither was setting me up with that Arithmancer from Stockholm. For future reference, Apparating to an ice bar in February is not my idea of a good time."

"Harry honestly thought you'd like him," Ginny said, without much conviction.

"Harry really doesn't want me to remarry, which is why he suggested that poor man to begin with."

Ginny winced.

Hermione smiled benignly. "It's simple, really. I'm lonely. The Ministry keeps me too busy to plan a romantic life, and I haven't got *any* patience for reassuring men who are whining about the perils of dating Hermione Granger, One-Third and Former One-Half of Two-Thirds of the Famous Trio that Saved the Wizarding World."

Ginny shook her head. "Hermione, I've heard about what goes on at those speed-dating parties..."

"Oh, really? And you a happily married woman, too."

"George told me," Ginny said.

"George tried it?" Hermione was intrigued. "Did he like it?"

"He thought it was silly."

"He's certainly an authority in that area."

"Moving from table to table, taking the same stale questions from one witch after another...where do you live, what do you do, what was your favorite subject at Hogwarts? He said it was like O.W.L.s, only with cheap wine in plastic cups."

"Look, at least there would be refreshments. *And* I'd be the one asking the questions. I assure you, mine wouldn't be stale." Hermione did her best to look prim.

Ginny looked profoundly unconvinced.

"Ginny! It's all about no-strings-attached fun," Hermione said. "I'm not in the market for a soul mate. I just want to see what's out there. I don't want depth."

"Well, you won't be disappointed there." Ginny shrugged and polished off the remains of her cappuccino. "From what George said, it makes Quidditch look like the Department of Mysteries."

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And here Hermione was, alone with her bad idea at Madam Kerensa's Magical Romance Roundtable.

Well, not precisely alone. Eight other witches sat awkwardly beside her in a circular arrangement of small, wobbly tables. (Hermione's was easily fixed with a murmured Steadying Charm.) The basic equipment included a small writing tablet plus quill and the required plastic cup, nearly full.

George had certainly been right about the wine. Mind, there was a cash bar available that featured the hot new Veritas cocktail (orange juice, soda water, vermouth and a splash of Veritas serum). There weren't many takers.

Hermione, for one, had no intention of drinking much tonight. Too much planning had gone into this event to waste with a stray tipsy outburst. There'd been the usual hair-dress-shoes sort of planning, which she hated anyway, and which was more complicated than usual because she was dressing the glamour rather than herself. (But the result...tailored blue robes, smooth blonde chignon, elegant but minimal makeup...had been worth the time, she had to admit.)

Then, there had been the more advanced reconnaissance...identifying the standard anti-glamour spells, and developing the appropriate counterspells. Add to all that her basic background research, which had consisted of three articles on the subject in the back issues of *Witch Weekly*:

Speed Dating: Muggle Method, Magical Moments.

Wizard Whirlwind: My Spellbound Night of Speed Dating.

I Sent Him An Owl, He Sent Me a Howler...How to Handle Speed-Date Rejection.

(That third article was a bit off-putting.)

At first glance, the arrangement had seemed logical enough: The witches sat at their tables. The wizards moved from station to station. One seven-minute question-and-answer session later, and the next wizard arrived for a new round. You marked a scorecard and took notes to keep everything straight.

Afterwards, you looked over your notes and decided which wizards merited a follow-up owl to arrange a more conventional date. It was a bit like debating the flavors at Fortescue's, only with wizards instead of ice cream. Simple.

Except that here, the flavors talked back. Naturally, on some level she had grasped that eventuality, but now, face-to-face with...well, their faces...it was somewhat more awkward than she'd imagined.

They were just past the evening's halfway point. Five of the nine wizards had rotated through her station. The tablet in front of her instructed her to score them from 1 to 5, 1 being a complete miss, 5 being a solid hit.

Hermione looked over her list. Two 1s, a 2 and two borderline 3s. Not terribly inspiring.

Whoever could imagine that speed dating would seem so . . . *slow*?

Probably her cover story had been a mistake. Occupation: Librarian. It had seemed a safe, innocuous job description. She had supposed that most wizards would find it boring and quickly move on to other topics. Indeed, most did.

Two, however, harbored some really extraordinary fantasies about librarians, unfortunately.

(Could one even *do* some of those things on a ladder? And as for the bit with the books...disgusting. Surely there was a statute against such a misuse of magical property. If there weren't, she'd write one.)

A generalized rustling and scraping of chairs caught her attention. Lovely. It was break time. The wizards drifted toward the bar area, often ordering Firewhisky and the odd Butterbeer. (Still no takers on the Veritas). The witches were either tabulating their results or rising from their tables to stretch out a bit.

Hermione looked over at the witch on her left, a dark, fine-boned woman who sported stylish black-rimmed glasses and an even more stylish pair of slouchy black ankle boots. They'd been sharing speaking glances all evening. As a matter of fact, the witch on the left could say quite a bit with a glance, Hermione thought. If looks could kill, several of the wizards in the room would be permanently out of rotation by now. Watching her from the corner of one eye had been one of the evening's few high points for Hermione.

The witch on the left was scribbling a final note on the page in front of her, her quill moving in quick, decisive jabs. Feeling Hermione's gaze, she shut the notebook with a bored shrug. "How goes the search for Mr. Right?" she asked.

Her voice was low and musical, slightly throaty. The wizards were probably mad for it, Hermione thought.

"Oh, not badly. A couple of prospects, maybe," she said.

"Amazing." The witch on the left stretched lazily. "I've had a couple of prospects, too...for one of Newt Scamander's books."

After a startled pause, Hermione laughed. "That's a bit harsh, surely!"

"Not nearly harsh enough," said the dark witch. "Are you always such a Goody Two Shoes?"

"No!" That stung a bit. "Are you always such a charmer?"

"Hardly." The witch on the left seemed quite amused. "I'm being exceptionally nice tonight."

"That's a relief," said Hermione. She paused. "Well, I have to admit, you've been amusing to sit next to, Ms....I didn't catch your name?"

"Sabrina. Yours?"

"Erm, Maia." She wished she could have hit upon something more original.

"Nice name." With a quick, almost negligent flick of her hand, Sabrina flipped one end of an amber silk scarf over her shoulder.

This Sabrina certainly has something, Hermione thought, *even if it isn't a sweet personality*. The short, fitted black wool dress buttoned snugly down the front, and that jacket slung over the back of Sabrina's chair was definitely Italian leather.

Actually, she had a very Italian-movie look in general. Hermione could just picture Sabrina as the chic, worldly wife of a womanizer played by Marcello Mastroianni, debating dialectic materialism and shrugging off the perfidies of men.

Instead of which, here she was scribbling notes at a speed-dating party. *Humph*, Hermione thought. *What makes her think she's so superior?*

"Actually, nothing," Sabrina said. "You really do have a well-developed sense of insecurity, don't you?"

"Pardon me," Hermione said, flustered. "I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud."

"You hadn't," said Sabrina. "But you're child's play to read."

"Well, *you're*...you're..."

"Incredibly chic? Irresistibly adorable?"

Hermione burst out laughing. "Yes to the former, no to the latter. As I'm sure you already know."

"Believe me, I know," Sabrina said. There was an edge to that rich, musical voice that gave Hermione momentary pause. Something tugged at the outermost corners of her mind, nagging but fleeting, an impression of an impression. *Now what is that*, she wondered, *and why would I almost think of it?*

But before she could chase down and pick at this stray bit of mental lint, Madam Kerensa was calling them to order for the final round.

Hermione resumed her seat with a sense of reluctance unrelated to the boring evening before her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the witch on the left lean slightly toward her table.

"Maia!"

"What?" Hermione said distractedly. A beefy-looking wizard wearing a rather loud Chudley Cannons T-shirt was bearing down upon her table.

"Obviously this evening is complete rubbish," Sabrina murmured. Hermione had to admire her ability to project from one corner of her mouth. "What do you say we have a drink afterward and compare our war stories?"

"All right," Hermione whispered.

"What did you say?"

"I said, fantastic!" Hermione glanced up with a sinking feeling as a shadow fell across her table.

"Brilliant!" The Chudley Cannons fan beamed down at Hermione. "And I only just got here, too."

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"Thanks a lot, by the way," Hermione said, inhaling the spicy, slightly fruity scent of the pinot noir in her glass. A very nice pinot it was. And a very nice Muggle wine bar, too. After the last few hours, Hermione could certainly give Wizarding company a temporary miss. "I couldn't shake that Cannons berk loose for ages, he was so convinced we'd hit it off. It took me twenty minutes to find a safe place to Apparate."

"So that's why it took you so long to get here," Sabrina said. "I wondered."

"Well, I certainly wasn't going to skip out on you. Merlin knows I needed to do something fun tonight."

"Oh, didn't we have fun speed dating, then?" Sabrina mocked, though not unkindly.

"Right. It was the most magically romantic night of my life," Hermione deadpanned.

They both laughed at that, which was the cue that launched a most pleasant interlude spent ruthlessly dissecting the ups and downs of the evening.

"Of course he had to inform me in great detail about the witch who never understood him properly and never was a sport about his playing Quidditch with his mates every Saturday and Sunday." Hermione was on her third glass of wine, and the evening's adventures were starting to look funny. Or perhaps just a bit blurry. "All the while, of course, shoving his knees up against mine under the table. Subtle of him."

Sabrina stubbed out her cigarette with a vicious jab of the wrist. "Why didn't you just hex him?" she asked.

Hermione looked at Sabrina carefully. She seemed to be serious.

"That's not on," she said after a moment. "Besides which, I'm sure Madam Kerensa has rules against hexing people."

"Oh, of course she does." Sabrina swirled the wine in her glass and held it up for inspection. It glowed rosily, suffused with the warm, dim light from the wall sconce above their booth. "I'm sure she has rules against glamours, too, but you didn't trouble yourself with those, did you?"

Goodness, it was noisy in here. "Excuse me?"

"Rules. Against. Glamours," said Sabrina, dripping precision and condescension in equal measure. (Once again, Hermione felt that frisson of familiarity.*Who sounds like that?*) "Such as the rather obvious one you've got on right now."

Hermione put her glass down, very carefully. Equally carefully, she let her right hand rest upon the table as she calculated the swiftest way to move it toward the seam slit where her wand was hidden.

"I wouldn't, Ms. Granger."

Oh, for fuck's sake. She might have known Sabrina would have noticed ...

Wait. Ms. Granger? *Ms. Granger?* "Who the hell are you?" she hissed.

"The light dawns. Alert the *Prophet*."

Actually, realization had just hit like a lightning bolt. Sabrina's rich alto was gone, and in its place was a very, very familiar voice. The fact that it was now emerging from the elegant witch opposite her sent an icy shock straight down Hermione's spine. Her hands curled into fists upon the table.

"Severus sodding Snape..."

"The middle name is Tobias, Ms. Granger."

"Never mind your middle name! And you can skip the 'Ms.,' as well you know."

"I stand corrected." Sabrina...no, Snape...removed his (her?) glasses, the better to glare at Hermione. Under her fascinated gaze, a smooth wing of chin-length dark hair swung forward across one cheek as black eyes bored into hers. How in Merlin's name had she missed those eyes? Probably because the eyeglasses had distracted her. They really were great-looking specs. Must remember to ask him where he got them...*No, Hermione!* she thought. *Focus!*

"Yes, the eyeglasses are a nice touch, aren't they?" Snape said. "Charmed, too...they alter the way one perceives the shape of the wearer's eyes. Can't do anything about the color, I'm afraid, but we've found that altering the shape has a remarkable ability to confound the nosy."

"Sussing out an impostor is hardly being nosy!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Why, no, it isn't; I completely agree."

"Damn it! Very well, you caught me out. Happy? That doesn't explain what on earth *you* were doing at Madam Kerensa's." Hermione trailed off. "Wait. You said, *We've* found that altering the shape..."

"Astute recognition of the plural usage, Granger. Yet another triumph for Hogwarts' brightest mind."

"Oh, do give it a rest, Severus." Hermione's thoughts were racing. "This is a Ministry project?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Snape drained his glass, setting it down upon the table with a quiet clink. "And what might your excuse be?"

"Never mind that." Hermione found her cheeks turning hot, and a sense of deepening humiliation began to swamp her. Suddenly, she no longer gave a Knut what Snape's Ministry project might be. She snatched up her evening bag from the banquet seat beside her and began scrabbling through it. "Look, it's been delightful. I'm sure you'll derive endless hours of amusement from this little interlude, but it's getting late. I think this'll cover my share of the drinks..."

Snape's hand shot out to cover hers. "Wait."

"Why?" Hermione stared at the long fingers on her wrist. Immaculately manicured, too, with deep red polish. She blinked. "Severus, even if I wanted to continue this conversation, you must know that you're making my brain ache at the moment."

"You're having the same effect on me," he replied. "Look, Granger...Hermione. I ... fully appreciate the awkwardness...the *absurdity*...of this situation, but might I request the favor of continuing the conversation?" He smiled slightly at Hermione's dubious look. "I suggest we do so in more suitable surroundings...and in our usual personae."

Hermione considered for a moment, then nodded decisively. "Fair enough. We'll Apparate to my place."

"I said 'suitable' surroundings."

"Oh, stop. It's a bit late for Victorian morality, wouldn't you think?" And Hermione had the satisfaction of silencing Snape, if only momentarily.

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Once they had popped into the sitting room of the flat she kept in London, Hermione gave a small sigh. Silently, she restored herself to her usual appearance.

"Much better," said the voice behind her.

"Thanks," said Hermione, with studied politeness. "I'm going to put the kettle on now. I look forward to seeing the actual you in a moment." She headed toward the galley kitchen, not sparing a glance over her shoulder.

She returned to find Snape by the fireplace, staring into the flames that now crackled there. Much to her relief, he had resumed his accustomed gender, height and glower. In place of the elegantly cut black dress were Snape's trademark, tightly buttoned black coat, black trousers and dragonhide boots.

Hermione found herself missing the slouchy ankle boots.

"Thank you for the fire," she ventured. "It's a rotten night out."

"Yes," was all Snape had to say.

Considering and discarding a number of questions, accusations and inanities, Hermione opted for silence and a chance to give Snape a thorough looking-over. There were no surprises. He was exactly what she had grown to expect during two decades of sporadic but spirited encounters with the Ministry's most secretive security expert. Indeed, but for the scattering of silver threads in his dark hair (which was quite a few inches longer than Sabrina's), he looked much the same as the bad-tempered professor who had taught her Potions and Defense at Hogwarts.

The only other notable change was the vicious little row of scars on one side of his neck, whose appearance Hermione knew only by dint of surprising Snape in his shirtsleeves in his Ministry potions workshop one hot July morning. The memory had remained rather vivid after three years, due entirely to Snape's vituperative reaction, Hermione hastened to assure herself.

But watching him now, she was overcome with the more recent memory of his chic alter ego. A remarkable transformation...it made her own disguise look amateurish by comparison.

Underneath her lingering embarrassment, Hermione realized, was sheer jealousy. Here she had been priding herself on a nicely done disguise. Trust Snape to go her one better, and to top it off with a dash of sheer nerve. She wondered if she possibly could have entered Madam Kerensa's disguised as a man. What she wouldn't give to learn exactly how Snape's appearance-altering charm was achieved! Or was it a more effective version of Polyjuice?

Not that Snape would share anytime soon. For one thing, he was an Unspeakable, and inscrutability went with the job. For another, the man was ridiculously difficult on principle.

Well, she could hardly blame him, what with barely surviving a close encounter with the Dark Lord's pet assassin ("entirely due to my own preparations and the timely arrival of a cadaver-gathering team, Granger," as Snape never tired of pointing out), not to mention an extended, acrimonious post-war inquiry.

Hermione had never been able to tell how Snape had felt about the result...an Order of Merlin Second Class and a more or less mandatory assignment to the Unspeakables. About the only emotion of his she could reliably read was his profound distaste at those rare moments she was granted access to his research (by direct order from the Minister, of course).

Still, for all his vitriol, he really could be the most stimulating conversationalist when he chose. Odd to think that nearly all of her most pleasant memories of the years spent at the Ministry involved bickering with Snape over something or other.

The sound of a throat being pointedly cleared woke Hermione rudely from her reverie.

"I believe an apology may be in order," said Severus Snape.

"Pardon me," said Hermione after a moment. "I thought I heard you say 'apology'; perhaps I misheard..."

"Granger, try not to make this irritatingly awkward moment any more irritating and awkward than it has to be. If you can."

Well, that certainly sounded more like the Snape she knew, right down to the "Granger", which he never had managed to hyphenate with "Weasley".

"I see," Hermione said. "I accept your apology. Except..."

"Except?"

"For what?"

She was rewarded with a genuine look of surprise upon Snape's face. "For what?" he repeated. "I should think that would be obvious."

The kettle chose that inconvenient moment to begin singing. "Excuse me," said Hermione, and she went back to the kitchen to brew the tea.

When she returned to set the tray down upon the low table by the fire, Snape looked up from another contemplation of the flames, his expression once again guarded. It made Hermione feel a bit better to think Snape might have something to guard in the current circumstance. She poured the tea, knowing without asking how Snape liked his (strong and black, for the record).

"Now then," said Hermione, once he had settled in the chair across from hers. "Why apologize? I assume you were working tonight, were you not? Testing whatever it was you were testing?"

"Yes," said Snape reluctantly. "It was a test run. I can't say more."

Hermione gave an impatient shake of her head. "I won't attempt to pry it out of you. Besides, if I'm really expiring with curiosity, I can always ask Kingsley about it."

Snape snorted into his cup. "On what pretext?"

"Oh, I'll think of something," Hermione said airily, privately conceding that it might be a bit tricky to approach Kingsley on this topic without disclosing her own part in the evening's festivities. "Anyway, why Madam Kerensa's?"

"Really, Granger, need you ask? You saw the nature of the result. Where better to test its effectiveness than in a room crawling with dunderheads ogling anything with..."

"Yes, yes, I see," Hermione interjected hastily. A memory of Snape's speed-dating alter ego suddenly assailed her, and a chuckle broke forth despite her best efforts. "And there you were, scribbling notes! I'll bet there weren't any Outstandings in that lot." She had to stop on another bubble of laughter. "Did anyone rise above the level of Troll, Professor?"

Snape gave her a black look. "I haven't been a professor in over twenty years, Granger, and sad to say, the pathetic specimens in that place are now ~~ex~~-students. But had circumstances been different, let's just say there are not enough House points in Hogwarts sufficient for I wanted to do." He paused. "And, I might add, Gryffindor would most certainly have paid its share."

Hermione's laughter died a quick death. She shot a wary look in Snape's direction. He gave an exasperated sigh.

"What in Merlin's name were you up to tonight, Granger?"

"Wasn't it obvious?" Hermione matched him glare for glare. "Or do you want the additional pleasure of hearing me spell it out?"

A strange expression crossed Snape's face. "You have a singular idea of what I might find humorous."

Hermione poured herself more tea, avoiding his gaze.

"Imagine my surprise at seeing you there," Snape continued. "In full blonde bombshell regalia, too."

"I was hardly a bombshell," Hermione snapped. "Stop exaggerating. And you still haven't explained how you knew it was me."

"Oh, just another new detection spell in the early development stages," Snape said casually. "It still has a few wrinkles to smooth out, but it works tolerably well when..." He stopped.

"When what?" Hermione forgot her own discomfort in the novel realization that Snape looked ... Hang on, was Snape looking sheepish?*Could* Snape look sheepish?

"When what, Severus?" Hermione asked again, as sternly as she could.

"Ah." No doubt about it. Snape could illustrate the "sheepish" entry in the Oxford English Dictionary. "Well, it began as a rather scattershot spell, cast over a broad area ..."

"Such as Madam Kerensa's," Hermione said.

"Yes. It locates the essence of a glamour somewhere in the vicinity. I've been trying to modify it to pinpoint the magical signature of the individual behind the glamour."

"Extremely useful." Hermione was impressed despite herself. "Well then, how did you manage to pinpoint my magical signature? What made the spell work 'tolerably well'?"

"Granger, I'm not supposed to be divulging Ministry secrets."

"You weren't supposed to be meeting me for a girls' night out, either," Hermione said. "The wine bar was a bit over and above, wasn't it? So tell me, or I'm telling Kingsley. What makes the detection spell work?"

Snape set his cup down with a bang, sprang from his chair and took refuge by the mantel again. "It's...only...effective...when...the...caster...has...feelings...for...the...subject," he growled at the fire.

"Sorry?"

"I said: It's only effective when the caster has feelings for the subject!" Snape bellowed. He turned back to the fire. "Obviously, it needs more work."

"Obviously," said Hermione faintly.

Snape regarded her with his fiercest scowl. "To borrow a phrase of yours: You've caught me out. Happy?"

"You have feelings for me?" Hermione said. Without quite knowing how, she was on her feet, too. "Feelings?"

"Granger, I'm not about to burst into song. Especially not *that* song."

She couldn't help smiling at that. "Please don't. Then I'd *know* you'd experimented with one spell too many."

"Is that what you think?" He had taken a step toward her. (Perhaps he'd seen something in her face. Ginny was right; she'd never be a poker player.) "That I'm unstable? That I'd have to be insane to contemplate such a thing?"

"No, of course not!" Although really, it was the only rational explanation. Severus Snape, who never hesitated to express just how annoying he found her company, confessing feelings for her that weren't a prelude to a hex? Could she possibly believe such a thing?

She found herself wanting passionately to believe such a thing. And if in fact such a thing were *not* true, it would be without question the most depressing disappointment of a completely depressing evening.

Amazing. When had this happened to her?

Did it matter?

Severus broke the silence with a sigh. "Granger, much as it pains me to admit it, you're a decent person. So, please, do me the favor of forgetting any of tonight happened. Why you were at that ridiculous place was your own business. I sincerely regret taking advantage of my disguise afterward. But seeing you there, I just . . . Well." He straightened, pushing himself away from the mantel. "That's irrelevant. It's late. We both have work in the morning."

"Oh, no you don't!" Hermione put a hand upon his sleeve, stopping him midway into his turn. "Anyway, I've got the anti-Apparition wards back in place."

"What is it, Granger?" He was trying for his usual sneer and doing fairly well, but only fairly. "Want a few more minutes to crow over your victory?"

"Severus."

"Can't resist the chance to twist the knife a bit?"

"Severus."

"Do you want me to apologize for that remark about your teeth in your fourth year? I'm still drunk enough."

"*Severus.*" Hermione had had enough. "Will you kindly. Shut. Up."

"Why? The better to hear you chatter ... away ... Might I ask what you think you're doing?"

"Experimenting," said Hermione, tightening her arms round his neck and fastening her mouth to his. She experimented in a leisurely fashion before allowing him to come up for air. "I'm attempting to see if it's possible to render you speechless."

"Odd," commented Severus a few minutes later. Hermione noted with satisfaction that he sounded a bit breathless. "I've been contemplating a similar study for quite some time." He wound his hands into her hair.

The study continued in some detail, much to the satisfaction of both parties.

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"Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"I really, really want those boots you were wearing at Madam Kerensa's. Tell me how you did those."

"That's a state secret, you know. You'll have to make it worth my while."

"What if I promise to wear them with a pair of Naughty Nox Knickers? And nothing else, of course."

"That might do."

...The End...

A few notes on names:

Kerensa: from the Cornish word for "love."

Sabrina: a Latin derivative of a Gaelic name, possibly originating as a name for the river Severn.

Maia: in Greek mythology, the mother (by Zeus) of the god Hermes.