

All You Need Is Love

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Hermione despises flight. Severus excels at it. Neither can resist a challenge. Will sparks fly when they take to the sky?

A Hard Day's Night

Chapter 1 of 20

Hermione despises flight. Severus excels at it. Neither can resist a challenge. Will sparks fly when they take to the sky?

A/N: This was written for the Winter 2008 SS/HG Exchange as a gift for leni_jess who wanted post-war, Severus rescuing Hermione from a wizarding world complication she hasn't mastered, Hermione being not too grateful, and Severus realising he's attracted to her, free to develop attachments, and coping with the need for courtship. (Wow!)

Chapter 1: A Hard Day's Night

In retrospect, she should have known better.

She never should have accepted the invitation—never should have dared foster the faint hope that her luck was about to change. None of the women in the Beast Division had been particularly friendly to Hermione Granger before. The few men seemed to give her a wide berth. Come to think of it, she'd spent the entirety of her past two years being systematically ignored by the many employees of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (the DRCMC to all who worked within). So when the fashionable clique of females from the Centaur Liaison Office specifically asked her to join them at the Ministry offsite meeting, she really should have questioned their motivation a bit more.

"When will I learn?" she asked.

No one replied, of course, because she was completely alone, standing in a well-trodden clearing. The meeting was over, the many attendees had long since departed the magical tent in small groups, grabbing Portkeys back to the Ministry. Hermione tried not to think about how gullible she'd been when the leader of her group—the last group to leave, by no small coincidence—had sweetly asked her to pack away the tent and meet them at the Portkey. She shouldn't have been surprised when she'd entered the clearing to find the women gone. She shouldn't have been hurt that they'd stranded her in the middle of nowhere, knowing full well the Ministry had placed Anti-Apparition charms around the meeting spot, stretching for several kilometres. And she certainly shouldn't be feeling that prickle of tears at the back of her eyes over the realisation that no matter how hard she tried, she would never fit in.

"Bugger," she said. Anger began to creep ever-so-slowly into her mind, effectively squeezing out the surprise and the hurt and the unshed tears.

With hands fisted on hips, she considered her options. She could start walking, but it would take hours before she'd be able to Apparate. Surely someone would miss her in that time.

"Not likely," she said with a snort.

No one at the office would notice her absence. She'd never been one to form shallow friendships, although she'd noticed her peers seemed almost rabid in their quest to

collect friends, like a child hoarding chocolate frog cards. In school, there'd been Harry, Ron, and then Ginny, and that had always been more than enough. Even now, four years after Voldemort's defeat, she was still very close to Harry and Ginny, although she hadn't spoken to Ron in several months. Their unsurprising break-up had turned ugly and alarmingly public when Ron had drunk too much one night and whinged about their failed relationship to a reporter. The fact that Ron's story had been greatly distorted by copious amounts of alcohol and years of insecurities hadn't mattered to the sleazy journalist from *Celestial Beings*, the sensationalistic gossip magazine of the wizarding world. The resulting article had been immensely unflattering and had arrived at a time when very little was happening in their world, news-wise. People had been hungry for a juicy story, and the press had been happy to oblige with an almost-laughable account of the former sweetheart heroine's downfall.

Shaking her head in frustration, she gazed around the clearing and thought that being stranded in the middle of nowhere was hardly apt punishment for perceived slights against Ron Weasley. Then again, one of the women in the group just happened to be Lavender Brown, who had never been able to extinguish that torch she'd carried for Ron. This, in hindsight, should have been yet another clue that evil was afoot.

Something purple fluttered on the ground, several metres away. She approached it warily and found a piece of lavender-coloured paper beneath a rock. Picking it up, she read a note obviously intended for her.

The brightest witch of her age

Needs a ride to the Ministry

Their is a way for her to leave

Just find the hidden Portkey

"Excellent spelling, Lavender," she said aloud, snorting at the mistaken use of 'their' instead of 'there'. Couldn't they make her the butt of their jokes without insulting the English language in the process?

A quick glance at the time reminded her all Portkeys would be deactivated in less than five minutes. She slipped the note into her pocket and got to work. Suspecting her co-workers had performed a simple Disillusionment charm, she knew she could find the Portkey by revealing their spell. Selecting an enormous puffball mushroom as a starting point, she began walking in ever-widening circles, searching for that elusive trace of magic to indicate a hidden object.

"Bugger, bugger, bugger." She chanted the words as she walked, wand held aloft, the cadence of her voice matching her steps. Her feet carried her faster. Her curses became more rapid. Minutes ticked down quickly, and still the size of the circle increased.

Beep!

She peered at her watch with a sinking feeling. Half past four: she was too late. Her eyes rose from her wrist, and not more than three metres in front of her, a ratty old broom began to appear. It shimmered like a desert mirage, then formed itself solid. She walked to the broom and saw yet another lavender-coloured note on the handle. Pulling it free, she read with a scowl:

Safe travels, Hermione. We know how much you love flying!

She turned her back on the broom and walked towards the centre of the imaginary circle, head down. Disappointment turned to frustration, and frustration turned to ire within two brief strides. Her anger built steadily now, pulsing through her like a living thing, clawing to get out.

"Damn it!" she shouted, slicing her wand towards the giant puffball mushroom. She watched in satisfaction as her spell sent the football-sized fungus soaring into the air, careening across the clearing. Then her eyes widened when she realised a wizard had been walking into the clearing, also with his head down. The trajectory of her missile was perfectly aligned with the unknown man.

THWOP!

Her hand flew to her mouth as the fungus hit the newcomer squarely in the chest. An enormous brown cloud of spores enveloped the black robes and obscured his face, as if he'd been attempting some ill-conceived Muggle magic trick. She rushed forward as the cloud began to settle. The man stood still as a statue as she approached.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry!" The mantra of apology repeated into the silence as she waved her wand over his robes and silently cast a Scouring charm. "I thought I was alone."

"Obviously," came the wizard's terse reply, causing her hand to freeze.

She knew that voice, that snide tone. There was only one wizard who could relay so much contempt with the utterance of one simple word. Dread choked her, but she forced her wand to his face. The heavy layer of fungus spores was removed with one quick flick.

A tiny squeak accompanied her voice when she stammered, "Pr-Professor Snape."

Thank you to my beloved beta, Karelia, for super-fast turnaround on this story.

I Saw Her Standing There

Chapter 2 of 20

A challenge is issued.

Chapter 2: I Saw Her Standing There

Unwavering black eyes glared down at Hermione. She swallowed hard and watched Snape's familiar features darken with displeasure. "I didn't realise you were at the meeting," she said.

"I wasn't," he replied. She waited for an explanation as to why he was at this particular spot, and after a moment of lip-pursing silence, he added, "I had business with the Minister."

"Oh," she said. She'd heard rumours that he worked on 'special projects' for Kingsley, but she'd never seen him at the Ministry. It seemed very clandestine to be meeting in the middle of an empty field like this, but she refrained from mentioning it.

With an air of impatience, he said, "It's a simple Scourgify charm, Miss Granger. Or have you already forgotten everything you learnt in school?"

"Sorry," she replied in a rush. A blush stole across her cheeks when she realised how long she'd been staring at him, her wand still pointed ridiculously at his face.

"Don't bother." He waved aside her attempts to finish the charm and completed the task himself.

She looked down, embarrassment and frustration battling for supremacy inside her mind.

Just like old times.

She hadn't seen Snape since the first anniversary of the battle at Hogwarts, when he'd received an Order of Merlin, First Class. And although she'd attended the award ceremony as a fellow recipient, she hadn't spoken to him. No one had spoken to him...no one had possessed the forbearance to so much as approach him. Not since he'd taught Defence Against the Dark Arts in her sixth year had she exchanged any words with him. She supposed it was little wonder his presence made her feel as if she were sixteen years old again.

She gestured towards the broom and said, "If you're here for the Portkey, it's been deactivated."

"It matters not," he said.

She appraised the shabby broom with a raised eyebrow, calculating its ability to support two adult riders.

In a somewhat boastful tone, he said, "I hardly require a broom to fly, Miss Granger."

The memory of a Snape-shaped hole in a window at Hogwarts entered her mind as she recalled his departure before the battle. "Yes, I had forgotten: you can fly without a broom."

"That's right," he said, openly sneering at her.

Even on a good day, she really detested being sneered at. And today had *not* been a good day.

"Hooray for you," she said. "Although, I hear it's easier if you open the window first." She tried to mimic his sneer.

He stared at her, his jaw hanging open.

She expected him to hurl one of his usual insults and was therefore quite surprised when his mouth snapped shut and his lips twitched.

Perhaps he's mellowed since the war. Now that the initial shock of seeing him had passed, she took a moment to consider him closer. Certainly he looked a bit different: his hair was shorter and swept back from his forehead. His features, which had always been striking in their intensity, had changed somehow...his face no longer bore the ugliness of being so frequently twisted by malice and anger. *Maybe the years have softened his hatred... Maybe his personality has improved with the passage of time.*

"Are you quite done gawking, Miss Granger?" he asked.

Then again, maybe not.

She flushed again and fought the urge to look away. Ignoring his question, she tried not to sound defensive and asked, "Why are you here, if not for the Portkey?"

With more patience than she'd imagined him capable of, he explained, "I saw you walking in circles and muttering to yourself. From a distance, you appeared to have been Confunded. I had little choice but to investigate."

A smile tugged at her mouth when she pictured how ridiculous she must have looked. Tilting her head, she folded her arms and regarded him anew. She had never pictured him as the sort of man who'd offer assistance to random strangers.

"I was looking for the Portkey," she explained.

His gaze flicked to the broom lying in plain sight on the ground.

"Have you considered asking a Healer to examine your vision?" he asked, and although there was sarcasm in his tone, it was mild...almost teasing.

She couldn't suppress the grin that dimpled her cheeks. Rather than hide her naïveté, she replied with the truth.

"That broom just appeared...it had been Disillusioned. A practical joke by my co-workers..."

"I see," he said. His brows drew together as he scrutinized her. He seemed to be on the verge of speaking, and she was a bit disappointed when he remained silent. He walked to the broom and scooped it from the ground.

"A rather ineffective joke, seeing how they provided a mode of transportation," he told her, holding the broom out.

"Yes." She bit her lip. There weren't many things she hated quite as much as flying.

She reached for the offending mass of wood and straw, surprised when their fingertips brushed and sent a jolt of energy up her arm. She stood transfixed for a moment, staring at his hand, lost in the sight of long, elegant fingers. Jerking her gaze away, she looked up, only to be hit by an even more shocking sensation. Too late, she realised she should have kept her focus on his hands. Dark eyes pinned her with a raw intensity that turned breathing into a complex, daunting task. She opened her mouth, desperate for air.

His gaze dipped to her parted lips. She held her breath completely. Then he bowed his head and spun away so quickly, she could do nothing but blink over the snapping of black robes before her.

What the hell was that?

She drew a steadying breath and wondered if perhaps she had been Confunded after all. Perhaps Lavender had put something on the broom...some obscure aphrodisiac that caused men and women to suddenly become aware of each other on a more primitive level. Experimentally, she gripped the broom in both hands and raised it to her nose, carefully sniffing the handle for the telltale scent of potion ingredients.

Her nose was still firmly affixed to wood when Snape turned back around. He raised both eyebrows in an expression that clearly seemed to question whether she had, in fact, gone completely mad. Lowering the broom slowly, she cleared her throat and ignored the burning in her cheeks. She could only imagine how ridiculous she had looked, standing there snorting the broom handle.

Although she'd never wanted to get away so badly, she wasn't about to add to her embarrassment by trying to fly the broom in front of him. It had been many years since

she'd ridden on a broom: she'd refused the transport ever since she and Ron had flown to the Chamber of Secrets for basilisk fangs. Everyone said it was easy to pick it up again...the phrase "just like flying a broom" was coined for a reason, after all...but it was not a theory she cared to test in present company.

"Well... it was nice seeing you again, Professor Snape," she said, hoping he'd take the hint and leave.

He watched her in silence and made no attempt to move.

She chewed her lip. "Have a pleasant journey ..." she said hopefully.

After several moments, he strolled closer, stopping only when his form filled her entire line of sight. The many buttons on his coat mesmerised her, until finally, she lifted her eyes to his. "Off you go, then," she whispered.

Amusement crossed his face, making him look more handsome than she'd ever remembered, and serving to confuse her further when that completely inappropriate realisation struck her.

"Are you attempting to dismiss me, Miss Granger?" he asked, arching one slim eyebrow while angling his chin down.

"Not at all," she lied. "I'm certain you have better things to do than be waylaid by a former student."

"Quite so," he agreed. "But I would be remiss to leave aforementioned former student alone. I'll ensure you're safely away before I leave."

"Oh, that's really not necessary," she assured him. "I'll be fine. You go ahead."

Leaning closer, he smiled and whispered, "Miss Granger, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were afraid of flying."

The mocking smile was almost comforting in its familiarity. Certainly it served as a far more accurate match to her other memories of him. Her reluctance to reply caused his smile to turn into a sneer, bringing about her almost automatic response to being challenged.

"I'm not afraid," she said, despising the petulance in her voice.

His face was smug, expectant. "Prove it."

"Right," she said and gritted her teeth. She stomped to the centre of the clearing and flung one leg over the broom, wishing she'd elected to wear trousers. At least her skirt was long and flowing. Combined with her robes, she shouldn't expose herself too badly. With a grimace, she kicked the ground and rose unsteadily into the air, hoping her pride wasn't about to kill her.

Many thanks to darling Karelia for fantastic beta skills!

Something (In The Way She Moves)

Chapter 3 of 20

Severus has second thoughts.

Chapter 3: Something (in the Way She Moves)

Severus watched as woman and broom rose higher, dipping and wobbling in a nauseating display of substandard flying skills. He snorted. Gryffindors were so damned easy to bait, it almost took the fun out of it. Almost. He supposed he should be feeling remorse at instigating the scene before him. But it had been far too long since he'd had the opportunity to appreciate such ridiculous antics. And besides—if the young woman was foolish enough to value her own stubborn pride more than her safety, no doubt she deserved his disdain.

A frown drew his brows together. He peered at his fingertips and rubbed them together, remembering. There had been a moment there...

No.

It's ludicrous! Impossible!

Not only was Hermione Granger a former student, she was quite possibly the most irritating pupil he'd ever had the displeasure to teach. True, she had changed somewhat, at least physically: she was quite clearly a woman now. But there was still something about her that set him on edge. As a student, she'd been exceedingly bright. But her intellect had been overshadowed by her insistence to display her knowledge at every turn. He tried to reconcile his memories of the girl to the woman high above him. Impossible.

The younger Hermione had never exhibited that unmistakable presence of maturity in her demeanour. He presumed she'd experienced her share of horror while helping Potter during the war. That would force anyone to grow up, and grow up fast. His frown deepened, however, when he realised it was not her attitude, or her intellect, or her maturity that gave him pause and delayed his departure. It was her eyes. There was something in those expressive brown eyes, those windows to her soul. A trace of sadness, perhaps, just beneath the confidence. It stirred something inside him.

He was no stranger to practical jokes. He knew a thing or two about pride, as well, and what a poor shield it made.

His gaze lifted to the sky. She appeared to be flying higher rather than forward, although the term 'flying' was perhaps too generous for the aerial acrobatics being performed. He watched the struggle taking place high above him and shook his head. It was obvious she didn't care for flying. Her entire body had radiated fear when she'd taken the broom from him. Evidently, she'd never lost that insatiable need to prove herself. It was something else that was all too familiar to him. As she dipped and zigged towards the clouds, he felt a begrudging admiration for her courage, if not her form.

Although he rarely acted spontaneously, the urge to follow her was overwhelming. He chose to ignore the inexplicable pull he'd felt at her touch and assured himself he simply wished to avoid any guilt, were she to fall.

Crouching low to the ground, his fingertips brushed the thick carpet of grass. He barely noticed the soft blades caressing his skin. His magical powers pulsed and vibrated

within him, and he channelled the force into a well of energy inside his head. He let it spread through his body, filling his limbs, surging to the end of each pale finger. There was no longer a need for a wand or a hand with which to wave it. His entire being became the instrument, his thoughts the seasoned conductor.

Up!

At once he was airborne, soaring through the sky at speeds so great he struggled to keep his eyes open. He squinted through narrow slits, focusing only on the dark object in the distance as it grew closer.

Huge thanks to Karelia for her beta skills!

Hello Goodbye

Chapter 4 of 20

Pride goeth before the fall.

Chapter 4: Hello Goodbye

Buggeration!

Within one minute of liftoff, Hermione's knuckles had turned white from gripping the broom handle with such force. Within five minutes, her hands had cramped and frozen into their vice-like positions. She doubted she could pry them from the wood even if she'd wanted to, although the very thought of such action made her sick.

It required all of her concentration to stay atop the loathsome stick, leaving little energy left for steering. She had chanced a look at the ground, and that act of insanity had confirmed two things for her: one, she was about to toss the packet of crisps she'd eaten at the meeting; and two, she didn't seem to be making much progress with leaving the perimeter of the clearing.

In truth, her attention was being unfairly diverted by her recent meeting with Snape. She found herself replaying their bizarre encounter when she really ought to be focusing on her flying, and those images blocked all thoughts of her eventual destination. Had he departed the clearing, or was he still watching her? She swung her head around, starting at the sight of a dark form rocketing through the sky towards her.

Her jumpy reaction caused her broom to dip forward, and she jerked her head back around. The rapid movements were too much for the broom to accommodate, and she soon tilted too far to the right. A nauseating view of the ground filled her vision. Heart pounding, she yanked the broom back to the left. And overcompensated. Violently. She swung all the way around now, until her own momentum had her spiralling through the air, performing two complete mid-air corkscrews before toppling from the broom entirely.

Panic snaked its icy fingers around her throat, refusing to release its stranglehold for what seemed like an eternity as she plunged towards the ground. Years might have passed before rational thought returned. She fought the wind whipping at her robes and grabbed for her wand. Her hair snapped around her face, and she had to squeeze her eyes together as loose strands sliced at her.

With sudden force, she slammed against something hard. She cried out in fright, waiting for the pain to take hold. The ground had seemed very far away...she couldn't have reached it already. Blackness enveloped her senses, confusing her and inviting the return of panic. Still, she waited for the pain, and still, it did not materialise. How could that be? Was she dead? Impossible: she was still moving. Her descent had definitely been slowed, though...she was no longer free-falling. If anything, she felt as if she was moving backwards. And she still couldn't see...she could barely breathe. She struggled against the black shroud that covered her face, trying to throw it off while still searching for her wand.

"Hold still," hissed a voice. The panic fled, but her brain was frustratingly slow in piecing together the rest of the puzzle.

She couldn't tell which end was up, but she had a feeling...confirmed by the rush of cold air against the backs of her thighs...that she had been plucked from the air in the most unladylike manner possible. Some part of Snape (an arm, perhaps?) was wound around her chest, crushing her lungs and making it damn near impossible to breathe. Some other part of him (please let it be another arm) was squeezing her hip, and she felt as though she were folded in half.

Her assessment was confirmed when all motion stopped. She heard nothing but the sound of Snape's boots landing on the grass, followed by a stifled chuckle. Her feet and hands met the ground at the same time. She wobbled sideways and realised she was indeed folded over: her forehead was even with her toes.

Cold air rushed against her legs. She felt completely inside out...her legs, thighs, and arse were exposed to the elements, while her arms, shoulders, and head remained covered by skirt and robes. Judging from their positions, she'd apparently been tucked beneath Snape's arms like a sack of flour. There was no possible way to picture the scenario without her arse being prominently displayed before his face.

She swatted away his hands when he attempted to assist her and somehow righted herself into a standing position. There ensued a chaotic flailing of skirt, robes, arms, hands, and hair, until she was more or less put back together. Steeling herself, she turned her gaze to her ... *rescuer*.

He was laughing at her. She supposed she had expected some form of mirth...a smirk or a smile, perhaps. But no, this went far beyond mere glee. The bastard was so overcome with humour, he practically had to hold his sides. If she hadn't been so miffed over inadvertently mooning the world, she might have found the sight rather incongruous.

"Are you quite alright, Miss Granger?" he managed to choke out after a few moments.

She glared and fisted her hands on her hips. Perhaps the impropriety of the situation might embarrass him enough to sober. "Did you enjoy the view, Professor Pervert?"

He smiled. "Yes, Miss Granger, the view was lovely," he said. "Blue is suddenly my favourite colour."

So much for her plan to embarrass him. Her cheeks burned scarlet when she recalled the pair of silk knickers she'd worn today were, in fact, a deep sapphire blue.

"How dare you!" she fumed. "I wouldn't have fallen in the first place if you hadn't come swooping after me like some overgrown bat!"

The bat reference erased his smile at last. "Is that any way to thank someone for saving your life, you ungrateful little twit?"

"Saving my life?" She stomped her foot against the ground. "I had everything under control!"

"How silly of me not to realise that," he said with a snarl. "I suppose plummeting to your death was simply one facet of your brilliant plan?"

"I was retrieving my wand!" she answered. "I would have had time to cast a Hover Charm if I hadn't been snatched from the sky." *Perhaps.*

"I see," he said. He remained silent for several moments, until she began to squirm beneath his familiar glare. "You are the most obstinate creature I've ever met. And seeing how you'd rather risk your own foolish neck than accept my help, I will gladly leave you alone with your pride. Have a pleasant journey back to Fieldstone, Miss Granger."

She received a curt nod and a view of his back as he turned and walked away. Her anger evaporated as she considered his words. He quite likely had just saved her life...or at least spared her immense pain...and she had responded like a spoiled child. She closed her eyes and sighed, regret adding itself to the strange parade of emotions she'd experienced today.

One glance at her broom confirmed it had been reduced to kindling, leaving her stranded yet again. The thought of walking the great distance to Fieldstone had her hurrying after Snape, speaking to his back as he retreated.

"Wait ... please." She was relieved when he stopped in mid-stride and turned to face her.

"Yes?"

"Umm..." *Damn...would the humiliations never cease?*

"Well, what is it?" he asked. "I have better things to do, Miss Granger."

She drew a deep breath and said, "Thank you," then watched him stroll closer.

His dark eyes danced. "Could you repeat that?" he asked softly. "I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

She knew full well he had heard her the first time, but with a sigh of resignation, she supposed she deserved a little bit of spite for her behaviour. A *very* little bit.

"Thank you for catching me when I fell," she said. *Although I would have been fine. Probably.*

She watched his face, noting the smirk of self-satisfaction and preparing for the onslaught of insults meant to make her feel incompetent, stupid, and clumsy.

"You're welcome," he said. The smirk turned into a smile.

Hmm. She waited for a trap...surely it couldn't be this easy. When no malice materialised, she returned his smile and drew another breath. She'd managed the apology, but she still had to ask for help in getting to Fieldstone.

"Do you... um... that is, can you... um..." she began, at a loss for how to phrase such a request. She watched his amused expression spread as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Will you... help me get to Fieldstone?" she managed at last.

"And how exactly would I accomplish that?" he asked, evidently unwilling to make this any easier.

"I was hoping perhaps... you could give me a ride?" she asked, faltering over the image of Snape riding her in ways that had nothing whatsoever to do with flight. Her face was heating rapidly as he stared at her in silence, his slight smile still firmly in place.

"Please?" she added for good measure.

It seemed to be the only thing he'd been waiting for. "Certainly," he said, dropping his arms to his sides as he advanced on her.

He moved so fast...too fast...and she stumbled back without thinking. He froze.

His ensuing burst of laughter held no humour. "I believe you'll actually need to touch me if this is going to work."

Appalled by her own response to him, she said, "Yes, of course. I just hadn't considered... how..."

Her voice faded while she tried to overcome her trepidation. She raised her arms towards his chest, hesitated, then lowered them.

You're being ridiculous! she chided herself.

She moved closer and tried again: she raised her arms, hovered, and then lowered them. Then raised and lowered them again. And again. And still once more, until it began to look as if she were performing some sort of bizarre interpretive dance.

The thought of throwing her arms around his neck...of holding onto him while they flew to Fieldstone, bodies pressed together...was simply too much to contemplate. It made her stomach jump so high she feared it might leap straight out of her body. Touching him in this manner was just so personal ... so familiar. Like a close, intimate hug. And Severus Snape just wasn't her idea of a huggable sort of wizard.

I owe Karella lots of chocolate and wine for her lovely, fast beta skills on this story!

Ticket to Ride

Chapter 5 of 20

Hermione takes an unusual ride.

Chapter 5: Ticket to Ride

Snape's smile faded in direct proportion to the amount of time Hermione stood there, considering. When she saw the beginnings of a scowl, she swallowed her pride and gathered her courage. Her arms slid along the hard planes of his shoulders, hands entwining behind his neck.

I can do this. It's just like embracing my father.

Only it wasn't, of course. There was nothing patrimonial about the way her body came alive the second he wrapped his arms around her waist. He showed none of the hesitation that had plagued her: with one quick, hard move he brought her body against his fully, smirking at the involuntary gasp that escaped her throat.

Eyes as black as coal were lit with a sudden sparkle. She held her breath, helpless to slow the beats of her heart. She couldn't think past the feel of his body pressed against hers. Could he feel her heartbeat slamming against his chest where they touched?

"Hold on," he whispered.

She swallowed past the sudden dryness in her mouth and felt him crouch slightly. He lifted them into the air with enough speed to make her squeal. His deep chuckle was curtailed by the force of her arms around his neck as she clung to him, terrified. A quick glance down showed the ground rushing by, and she felt that packet of crisps threatening again as she tightened her hold.

"Can't... breathe..." he croaked. His hand left her waist as he attempted to pry her arms from his neck.

"Eeeeeee!" was all she could say when he tugged at her. All thoughts of propriety were abandoned when she felt herself slipping down his body. Clutching his shoulders, she scrambled higher and lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist before hooking her ankles together. Only when she was certain her grip was secure did she allow her stranglehold on his neck to ease. He made an odd guttural noise, something between a moan and a growl, which she hoped was the result of being able to breathe once more. Deeply disconcerted by the position of their bodies, she ducked her head beneath his chin and buried her face into his chest.

After several minutes, she managed to breathe without hyperventilating. She relaxed ever so slightly. Anxiety subsided when she realised her absolute faith in his flying abilities. Unencumbered by fear, her mind drifted. She amused herself by taking deep breaths, drawing in the unique scent of the man she'd glued herself to. He was spicy and tropical, like cinnamon and sandalwood, and she wondered what potions he'd been brewing to achieve the rich smell. There was a trace of wood smoke, as well, as if he'd been sitting in front of a fireplace. Deep, earthy tones joined the others. She chuckled in recognition.

Mushrooms! He should have let me finish that Scourgify charm.

She sniffed again, unsatisfied. There was something else here—something familiar, something she knew intimately. Inhaling deeply, she pressed her nose further into his robes. Then it hit her. He smelled like books—wonderful, lovely, amazing books! She indulged in another whiff, nuzzling into his chest as she smiled in delight.

His arms tightened around her. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt this... safe. She removed her nose from his robes and leant her temple against his chest. The ground below rushed by at a dizzying speed, but she was no longer afraid. Perhaps the strength of his embrace simply left no room for fright. Or maybe it was just the familiarity of his scent. Whatever the cause, she felt fearless. For the first time in her life, there was joy at being airborne. It was exhilarating.

She blinked against the wind slapping her face and focused on the tiny houses and trees passing far below their feet. Then she turned her head back against Snape's chest and breathed a sigh of contentment. She'd always detested flying, but this was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. If only she could fly the way Snape flew, she might always enjoy the sensation of flight. Perhaps he'd teach her, she mused, then wondered if she was mentally prepared to suffer the humiliation of being his student again.

Then again, they weren't exactly treating each other the way they had at any time in the history of their student-teacher relationship. She couldn't imagine herself wrapped around him this way when he'd been the Potions professor. Awareness made her body tingle, made her breathe too fast. She tried to dismiss thoughts of how hard and muscular his chest was, how strong his arms felt. She certainly didn't need to be reminded of the way he had lifted one of his thighs so that it was, at this very moment, pressing quite firmly against her arse. She willed her mind to stop thinking of the way their bodies were fitted together. The way her legs were spread open wide, her most intimate parts pressed against his abdomen. What good was the knowledge a few inconsequential scraps of fabric was all that separated their flesh?

Almost as if he could sense her thoughts, he shifted his hold. His arms moved across her back, soft and caressing. With sudden speed, his body jerked and straightened, causing the many buttons of his long coat to drag upwards. If she hadn't already been so aroused—so hyperaware—she might have been able to dismiss the dozens of tiny metal buttons creating a unique sort of friction in an area already too sensitive from being so near him. But there seemed to be no escaping such sensation today: she gasped and tried to stifle a moan. Burying her face into his robes once more, she prayed he hadn't heard her. Her nipples tightened into hard little buds, straining forward as if seeking his touch. Sensing a distinct lack of control over her body's reactions, she focused on her breathing, forcing steady, even exhalations from her lungs. It worked for all of two minutes. His entire body seemed to be vibrating beneath her, as if there was tangible power coursing through it. The feeling only intensified as their journey continued, until her body trembled in response. With her forehead pressed to his chest, she closed her eyes and abandoned the battle, chalking it off as yet another strange thing that had happened to her on this strangest of days.

As always, I owe huge thanks to Karelia for her patience and extraordinary beta skills.

Please Please Me

Chapter 6 of 20

Severus explores new territory.

Chapter 6: Please Please Me

Notwithstanding the mid-air rescue, Severus had never before flown with another person. His experience whilst saving Hermione could hardly be relied upon as sufficient research, other than the fact it proved he could support both their weights quite easily. He hadn't actually flown *with* her into the clearing; it had been a simple matter of landing her safely upon the ground. Any study he might have accomplished during the brief journey had been moot anyway. His attention had been unfairly diverted by the sight of her rather amazing arse and a pair of silky blue knickers. Therefore, he hadn't quite known what to expect when he'd granted her request for transport to Fieldstone.

Snake's Taxi Service, he thought. *Always ready to assist the stranded witch in need.*

The clinical, detached part of his mind contemplated a cause for the powerful, physical reaction he'd had the moment she'd wrapped her arms around his neck. A different part—the part he rarely listened to—acknowledged no other woman had ever made his body react so violently. She possessed a unique ability to stir his senses. The first part got to work formulating several excellent, precise reasons for his body's sudden desire: scientific explanations involving pheromones; biological reasons regarding the laws of nature and the need to copulate; magical explanations like the power he channelled manifesting in new ways at her proximity. He'd even considered the fact that it had been quite some time since he'd pleased himself with a woman. The hero title had made it easy to find a willing woman to bed, but he had quickly tired of shallow sex. Well... Perhaps not all *that* quickly, but he'd certainly become more selective. He rejected each of these possibilities, however, since none could account for his unique history with Hermione or things like admiration and respect.

Or those damn knickers.

He caressed her back, unwilling to accept the reality of how perfectly she fit into his embrace. He could feel her chest moving fast against his, rising and falling with each short, shallow gulp of air. He wondered if her fear of flying was to blame or if, perhaps, she was just as affected by their physical contact. The prospect of her responding with even half the force of what he felt caused the erection that had been steadily straining against his pants to surge upwards. He quickly shifted her higher. Her startled gasp made his body shake with need until he felt both incredibly strong and weak at the same time. Energy and desire coursed through his veins. His body burned everywhere she touched him. He searched the horizon for the rooftops of Fieldstone, desperate to set her down and do something—anything—to relieve this sudden ache.

At last he glimpsed small cottages and a tiny village. He scanned the area for a likely landing spot and chose a narrow, deserted lane behind the inn. His feet touched the ground close to the whitewashed stone building, and he stepped forward as her long, smooth legs uncoiled from his waist. By the time they stilled, he had manoeuvred them against the building, her back to the wall.

He drew away, just far enough to look down into her face. She seemed reluctant to remove her arms from his neck. He knew at once he had not imagined her state of arousal: her face was flushed; her eyes were enormous, the pupils enlarged to the point where very little light brown pigment remained. Her lips parted, full and soft and begging to be kissed. He watched her tongue swipe her lower lip as thoughts of how she would taste tortured him.

He looked into her eyes again, and although he'd given his body no command to move, his face lowered. She was breathing impossibly fast now, quick breaths fanning his face as he drew nearer. Her hands tightened behind his neck, as if urging him forward. His hands moved of their own accord, sliding from her back to the sides of her waist, drifting up over her ribs, until he felt the gentle swell of breasts against his palms. The sound of her breath catching in her throat had him stepping forward, pinning her body against the building with his chest.

Her arms moved, and he experienced a sudden flash of fear that she would push him away. But one hand trailed along his neck while the other sought his temple and delved into his hair. She seemed to be fascinated by her own movements. Then her eyes returned to his. The warm brown depths flashed with hints of gold. Her lids grew heavy when his hands moved to cup her breasts.

"Severus..." It was spoken like a plea, her voice rough.

Hearing his name on her lips broke him. He prided himself on control, but he could almost hear it snapping in two. He was barely aware of his mouth descending upon hers, feeling nothing but her lips. They were warm and lush, firm and yet impossibly yielding to his demands. She tasted sweet and young and perhaps just a little salty—like crisps—and the odd mixture heated his blood. Her mouth opened to him. He explored and devoured, unfiltered lust stabbing him when she captured his tongue in her mouth and alternately stroked and sucked it until he lost the power to think.

Desire turned the edges of his vision red. His ears rang with the sound of rushing blood. He used his chest to hold her against the wall while he grabbed her thighs, yanking her legs back up and around him. She pulled her mouth away, her frantic gasp echoing in the quiet alley. Her head turned and exposed the creamy skin of her neck. He feasted on the delicate expanse, his lips possessive as they trailed down her throat. He was only vaguely aware of his hips grinding against her in a rhythm older than time. Skilled fingers travelled along her thighs, wending beneath her skirt. Soon he encountered the little blue knickers: his hands cupped and squeezed the fine arse he'd glimpsed earlier in perfect timing to the rocking of his hips. Her pure, female moan of pleasure wrapped around him, spurring him on while demanding fulfilment. She was his, and he had to claim her as such. He had to have her. Now. His fingers tugged at silk, his teeth scraped her neck. He was going to fuck her. Right here. Broad daylight, completely exposed, against a wall—he didn't care. All that mattered was losing himself inside her. The sound of fabric tearing heralded his success. Nothing could stop him now.

Nothing, that is, except the back door of the inn slamming open and one very large, very irate innkeeper screaming at them. Hermione shrieked and scrambled away, clawing to climb up and over him like a cat about to be skinned.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" shouted the innkeeper.

Severus held up his hands in a placating fashion, but he had difficulty grasping what had just happened. His mind and body were far more focused on protesting the loss of the woman than worrying about the man lumbering closer. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of her fleeing around the side of the building. He snorted.

So much for Gryffindor bravery.

"You think this is funny?" asked the innkeeper. "What's the matter with you, eh? There are children inside!"

He muttered a hasty apology and headed in the direction he'd last seen Hermione. More than likely, she had already Apparated far away. He rounded the corner and searched anyway.

A/N: Karelia was especially kind and never once complained about having to beta 90 pages of Exchange fic with two days of lead-time. I don't deserve her!

Got To Get You Into My Life

Chapter 7 of 20

Reality returns.

Severus was amazed at how sharp his vision became as he searched for Hermione. The buzzing in his ears faded to a hum, and his senses slowly returned to normal. Then he was hit with the reality of what he'd almost done. He stopped mid-stride and braced his arm against the side of the inn.

What have you been up to since the war, Severus?

Oh, not much... public indecency... deflowering innocent students...

Alright, so that might be a tad melodramatic. Hermione was no longer his student, and she was well beyond the age of consent. And there certainly wasn't anything innocent in the way she'd kissed. The issue of deflowering was likely a moot point. Nevertheless, he'd been minutes away from pounding her against a wall in what could hardly be deemed a private setting. He'd acted like an animal, without any thought to consequence and caring for nothing but instant gratification.

He shook his head and pushed away from the building, surprised when a scrap of blue fabric fell from his hand. He bent to retrieve the torn knickers and stuffed them into his pocket. Cavemen were probably capable of more tenderness than he had just managed. She was not some broodmare to be mounted and coupled: she was an intelligent woman who undoubtedly deserved better. He ordered his feet forward. In the distance, a bushy-haired brunette leant against a tree in the small park, arms wound around her midriff despite the warmth of the afternoon.

"I thought you might have Apparated," he said when he reached her.

"I considered it," she told him. Her flushed face looked remorseful. He wondered where her regret rested...in the reality of what had *almost* happened, or in the loss of what had *not* happened.

Several moments passed in awkward silence. Longing still flooded his system, his limbs tingled from the rush of adrenaline. He couldn't begin to imagine what she was thinking, although he doubted it involved finishing what they'd started.

"What made you decide to stay?" he asked at length.

"I wanted to thank you for flying me here."

He smiled at her, his blood heating once more. "Perhaps you'd prefer to thank me in private?" It wasn't the most sophisticated of propositions, but he wasn't likely to be given a better opening.

The sight of her shy smile relieved him. At least she wasn't rejecting him entirely.

"This is going to sound incredibly hypocritical, given my recent behaviour," she began, "but I'm really not that kind of girl."

Some part of him knew that already, and another part...the part that was annoyingly noble and didn't understand the frustration of an ignored erection...was actually pleased by the confirmation that Hermione Granger valued men for more than the mere scratching of an itch. Somehow, the idea of his brightest student favouring completely meaningless sex had been inexplicably depressing.

"For what it's worth, the same applies to me," he told her.

"You're not that kind of girl either?" she asked.

He smirked and clarified, "I am not often moved to such reckless behaviour. I never just ... lose control... like that."

He wondered if she appreciated the tremendous amount of power he'd bestowed upon her with such an admission. She studied him for a moment and then nodded, as if she'd just made up her mind about something.

"I appreciate your candour," she said, her tone formal.

It was not what he'd expected her to say, and he waited for something further. When she remained silent, he deduced that she was indeed dismissing him, and his lips pursed. Old wounds reopened, sharp and all too familiar. She had used him, and he had allowed it...encouraged it, even. He should have known he couldn't trust her. "Are we done, then? You've taken what you needed and offered an appropriate payment for such?"

She winced. The colour drained from her face as she shook her head.

Fuck. Why couldn't he stop himself from lashing out like that? Once again, he had overreacted. He regretted his words, hating the bitterness that choked him whenever his vulnerabilities were attacked.

Closing his eyes, he inclined his head towards her and said, "My apologies. That was uncalled for."

She blinked several times and frowned, apparently taken aback. "I only wanted to thank you for your honesty."

"You're welcome," he replied. He kept his tone formal, as she had done earlier. Crossing his arms, he told her, "I'm certain you're anxious to return to the Ministry. You owe me nothing, and you may trust that I will mention this to no one."

Her frown deepened. She looked as if he had somehow wounded her further. "You're dismissing me?" she asked.

"You seemed eager to be rid of me a few moments ago," he pointed out. He would never understand the mysteries of a woman's mind.

She cocked her head to the side and regarded him. "Do you *want* me to leave?" she asked, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth.

He leant towards her face, as if he might kiss her, and whispered. "I thought I made my wants quite obvious."

She opened her mouth with a soft gasp, releasing the lip she'd been worrying from her teeth. Her smile seemed to grow with her confidence. "I wasn't asking if you wanted to shag me behind the inn. I believe we both know the answer to that question."

He returned her smile but said nothing.

Frowning slightly, she shifted towards him until they were nearly touching. She lowered her voice, whispering despite the solitude. "Speaking of which, you haven't seen my knickers, have you?" she asked.

"No," he lied automatically, albeit inexplicably. Raising his eyebrows at her in a disapproving manner he said, "Portkeys... brooms... knickers... you appear to have quite a problem keeping track of your belongings."

"Yes, well, I had help on the last bit," she said.

It was time to change the subject. "I believe we were discussing our wants. Since you don't appear to be in any hurry to leave, tell me... What, precisely, do *you* want?"

She went back to chewing her lip, watching him with narrowed eyes. "Well... would you be interested in... um... seeing me?" she asked.

"I can see you just fine," he replied. "You're the one with the vision problem."

She chuckled and placed her palms on his chest. "I meant more along the lines of seeing me in a relationship... with you... together," she explained.

Aha!

He stepped back and experienced a surprising pang of regret when her hands fluttered to her sides. Disappointment drew her face down, and she seemed embarrassed by what she'd suggested.

The entire idea of being in a relationship was unappealing, although he'd never actually tried it. But he'd heard enough horror stories to form a very strong opinion. It sounded like one enormous headache after another. He suspected the woman before him would make things interesting, but he was hardly in a position to go around courting witches half his age.

"I'm hardly in a position to go around courting witches half my age," he told her, instantly wondering why that had sounded so much better in his head.

"So your answer is 'no'?" she asked.

He regarded her carefully, uncertain of his reply. He had no desire to commit himself to a relationship with Hermione Granger. The mere formation of that thought sounded wrong on several levels. But he didn't care for the idea of never seeing her again, either, as that would necessarily preclude the possibility of future trysts. He much preferred to keep his options open.

Her lips quirked into a mischievous grin, and her eyes sparkled. "You don't have to decide now. Being half your age and all, I have plenty of time to wait."

He raised an eyebrow and glowered at her, disappointed when she appeared unaffected by his expression. He must be losing his touch.

Her tone became business-like. "No doubt you'll want to take your time to weigh the pros and cons, the benefits and the drawbacks," she said. "You'll need to analyse the situation for potential pitfalls before you can form a proper opinion on whether or not to pursue me further."

Words eluded him. His head spun from the speed at which she could transition from guileless to saucy. He shouldn't have found the combination of hesitation and self-confidence so charming, yet she intrigued him beyond all reason.

She continued, "I feel it's only fair to warn you, though: I've done the years of pining away for someone who never truly appreciated me, and I've done the torrid affair that burns hot and ends fast. I'm not interested in either of those things now."

After a moment of deliberation, he could no longer contain his curiosity. Although he suspected he would regret the answer, he asked, "What exactly *are* you interested in, then?"

"I thought I made my wants quite obvious," she said with a cheeky smile. Although she used the same words he had spoken earlier, he doubted they meant the same thing now.

"Enlighten me," he said, inclining his head. His hands clenched as dread filled him.

My thanks to Karelia for her beta skills. If there are any errors, it's only because I've made some revisions since the initial submission of this story back in November. Can't. Stop. Editing.

If I Fell

Chapter 8 of 20

Hermione knows what she wants.

Chapter 8: If I Fell

Severus observed Hermione as she hesitated. It was a simple enough question...what did she want from a relationship? More importantly, what would she expect from him?

She seemed unable to meet his eyes but finally said, "Well, naturally, I want to be respected. I'd like to be appreciated, too...I'm so tired of being taken for granted."

That seemed reasonable, he supposed, although he was careful to keep his features impassive.

"And I don't think it's asking too much to be cherished, as well." She sounded angry but looked flustered.

He frowned, realising he'd missed the mark on all counts when he'd had her against the back of the inn. Everything she wanted was no doubt practical, but it still sounded like an inordinately large amount of work. He was reminded why the thought of a relationship had long since lost its appeal. Not that he'd ever shied away from hard work...he prided himself on determination and forbearance. This particular undertaking had the potential to prove worthy of his efforts, yet he hesitated.

"And while you're busy making this monumental decision," she said, "you can teach me how to fly without a broom."

He blinked and raised one eyebrow. "I was under the impression you didn't care for flying."

She smiled. "So was I, until today. I've tried everything...brooms, Thestrals, hippogriffs," she said, ticking each finger as she recounted the various modes, "even a dragon! But I've never enjoyed the sensation before now."

"And what makes you think you'll still enjoy it if you're not in my arms?" he asked, surprised when she shrugged aside his arrogance.

"I won't know until I try."

"This is complex, advanced magic," he said, trying to impress upon her the difficulty of what she suggested. "It cannot be learnt from a book."

"Why does everyone always think I'm incapable of learning new things unless there's a book involved?"

"I merely meant..." he began, but she cut him off with a shake of her head.

"No matter," she said. "I can do whatever it takes to learn. And surely you miss having a willing pupil to order about?" Her smile was clearly meant to tease.

He forced himself to concentrate on what she asked, rather than the delicious thoughts the phrase 'willing pupil' had created in his mind.

"Do you suppose the prospect of having you for a student once again is really something that would motivate me?" he asked with a teasing smile of his own.

"You always took delight in berating me before."

He frowned, trying to recall. He supposed he hadn't spared much thought to his students' feelings, but there had been such larger issues...life or death issues...to contend with. The overwrought emotions of teenagers hadn't been high on his list of priorities. Still, he was surprised to find himself bothered by her words.

"I do not condone cruelty, nor have I derived enjoyment from such," he said. "Is that honestly your opinion of me?"

She opened her mouth as if to speak, then seemed to reconsider and offered him a shrug instead.

"It's hardly flattering or deserved," he said.

"Fair enough," she replied. She moved closer and met his eyes. "What could be better than an opportunity to prove me wrong, then?"

"I could think of a few things..." he said, lowering his voice and gazing at her lips once more. He watched her smile fade and her pupils widen. She swallowed, loud enough for him to hear.

Clearing her throat, she shook her head and said, "I'll wager I could learn in four lessons." Her eyes held the light of challenge now.

"It would be exceedingly unfair of me to accept that wager," he replied. "You work at the Ministry, after all. You can ill afford to be so careless with money."

"Oh, I have every confidence in my capacity to learn," she said. Arching an eyebrow, she added, "Unless you fear you've lost your ability to teach?"

"Hardly," he said. He paused to give her proposition its due consideration. Flying was an ancient art. Few witches or wizards possessed the talent or knowledge to practice it. He had learnt from Voldemort, through a series of tortuous lessons that had pushed the envelope of fear and intimidation. It was certainly not a method he'd be willing to deploy on Hermione, or anyone else for that matter. But perhaps there was another way.

He tilted his head to the side, thinking as he watched her. She undoubtedly had the intelligence and skill to learn. That alone lent the idea a bit more appeal. The challenge of finding his own teaching method intrigued him, as did the prospect of spending time together without committing himself to a relationship. Perhaps after a few lessons he could convince her that mutual satisfaction didn't have to come with strings. Yes, the more he weighed the decision, the more he liked it. He'd give her the lessons she requested, but he'd find a way to benefit as well.

"One lesson," he said. "And in return, you'll accompany me to the Ministry ball." Kingsley had more or less insisted he attend the annual fund-raising event for post-war charities. Since the Minister's relentless pursuit of the truth had exonerated him after the war, he could hardly refuse such an innocuous request.

When she failed to reply, he wondered if she'd already made plans to attend the ball with someone else. He'd never noticed her at these events in the past, which, now that he reflected upon it, was rather odd. Potter and the rest of the so-called war heroes were always in attendance, in all their intolerable glory.

"I'd love to go to the ball with you," she said at last. "Thanks ever so much for asking." She smiled and batted her eyelashes with great exaggeration. Then in the time it took to blink, all playfulness was gone, and her face became a mask of determination. "But I still want four lessons," she reiterated.

His pulse quickened, already anticipating their sessions and the unique opportunities their proximity would present. Still, he couldn't capitulate so soon...it wouldn't do to appear overeager. "Two. Don't try my patience."

She ignored him. "I haven't anything appropriate to wear to the Ministry ball. I'll need a dress, and shoes, and someone to fix my hair properly, and new robes, and..."

"Are you attempting to convince me or dissuade me?" he interrupted.

"I'm merely informing you that I'll be putting forth a great deal of personal expense to fulfil your request," she said, waving her hand in a regal manner. With a wicked smile she added, "I want to make sure I'm getting my money's worth in return. Four lessons, if you please, sir."

"Two lessons," he countered again. "I certainly don't care about your wardrobe...I've actually grown quite fond of that skirt you're wearing."

"Three lessons," she said. "And I can promise you'll care a great deal about my wardrobe." She moved closer while her expression turned seductive. Her tongue slid across her lips. Slowly, she walked her fingers up his chest and said, "Picture a silky black dress that clings to all the right curves. Think plunging neckline, low-cut enough to reveal a glimpse of cleavage and the softness of breast. Imagine tiny little straps that cross in the back. Or perhaps backless..."

"Done," he said.

Wait... what? His mouth had gone dry, and his tongue felt thick.

She chuckled. "I hadn't even come to the lace part yet," she told him with a knowing smile.

He closed his eyes and groaned. How in the hell had that happened? How had his excellent negotiation skills been so easily manipulated by the mere thought of this woman in a dress that probably didn't exist?

"You're lucky I'm feeling generous," he told her, trying to regain some footing. "When shall we begin?"

After settling on a time and location, she gathered her robes, as if preparing to Disapparate.

"Your bargaining tactics are impressive, Hermione, if a bit unconventional," he said. "But you should have held out for more...I would have granted you four lessons."

Her answering smile spread slowly as she gazed at him. "I would have settled for one, Severus. It seems we both managed to get what we wanted. Wouldn't you agree?"

Almost. He acknowledged her query with a slight bow of his head.

Turning in place, she quietly disappeared from sight.

He stood still for several minutes and pondered the events of the afternoon. It had been a very long time since he'd experienced such an array of emotions in the course of one day, let alone the space of a few hours. He marvelled at the way their encounter had managed to transcend the familiar irritation, ending with definite humour and undeniable desire. And the promise of a challenge... He could never resist a good challenge. He was inordinately pleased with his decision to investigate the crazy witch he'd seen walking in circles, talking to herself earlier. Despite the mould-spore bath and the wasted erection, the meeting had ended quite well. He anticipated their upcoming flying lessons with an eagerness he hadn't felt since... since... In truth, he couldn't remember the last time his future had held this much appeal.

He shook his head and Disapparated with an impatient snap.

Grateful applause to Karelia for the beta reading of this story!

Magical Mystery Tour

Chapter 9 of 20

Lessons at Hogwarts were never like this.

Chapter 9: Magical Mystery Tour

Hermione stood in an empty field on the outskirts of Oxfordshire, awaiting her first flying lesson with Severus. The interval since their last meeting had been the longest three weeks of her life. He had occupied her thoughts far too often. She convinced herself that she'd imbued their previous encounter with a great deal more scintillation than had actually existed. Surely, he hadn't looked as handsome as the image that kept creeping into her dreams. She'd never found him the least bit attractive when she'd been his student. Then again, she'd never seen him smile so easily, and she'd certainly never seen desire upon his face. She'd fallen asleep each night with the memory of his lips on hers, hungry and possessive. Each day, her mind drifted back to their encounter, recalling his arms around her, his lean body pressing her against that wall, burning her flesh. His mouth on her neck, his hips grinding into hers, his hands...his amazing hands...on her thighs, skimming ever higher...

With a frustrated sigh, she shook her head. Such daydreams had been her constant companions, making it almost impossible to concentrate at work. Which, she supposed, wasn't entirely a bad thing. She much preferred to indulge in lovely fantasies than listen to gossip and taunts from Lavender Brown and company. Unfortunately, this had likely contributed to her embellishing the memories of her meeting with Severus. Certainly she'd always admired and respected him, never more so than once the truth of his role in Voldemort's downfall had been revealed. But Severus Snape, an object of desire?

I've gone mad...it's the only logical explanation.

At the sound of a sudden, cracking noise, she turned and watched Severus appear. Her breath caught. His attention had been focused on the newspaper he carried, but he lifted his gaze and found her immediately. Her soft sigh floated on the air. It was a relief to realise she hadn't exaggerated her image of him after all. If anything, he was unfairly adding to her fantasies by wearing a pair of small reading glasses that he removed as he strode towards her. He looked sexy and scholarly and confident, and she knew at once she'd been wise to take that frightening leap of faith by suggesting a relationship.

"Have you been waiting long?" he asked when he stopped before her. His eyes studied her face.

"Not at all." She watched him fold the newspaper and tuck it inside his robes. "You read while you Apparate?"

"I was just finishing an article," he replied. He sounded defensive, as if she had accused him of something taboo. "Why? What do you do?" he asked with a frown.

"I close my eyes and try very hard not to vomit," she replied.

He smirked but wisely refrained from commenting.

After their last meeting, she had determined that any discussion of a potential relationship would need to be instigated by her. Severus might be older, but she suspected she held the advantage in dating experience, however slim.

"Have you decided yet whether you wish to pursue me?" she asked.

"Pursue you? Were you intending to flee?"

"Certainly not. I meant 'pursue' in the more intimate sense of the word."

"Ah, the more intimate sense." His gaze strayed to her lips as he leant closer. "In the more intimate sense, there is one thing I'd very much like to pursue."

She ignored the innuendo, but his sultry tone was harder to dismiss. Forcing an innocent expression, she asked, "Does it involve flying?"

"It could, I suppose." He looked away and tilted his head, as if pondering. "I'd have to perform some calculations and test the logistics to ensure such an act could be supported, physically..."

"You really are impossible, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I'm far too clever to be impossible."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't forget arrogant, as well."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." His lips twitched.

"Not entirely, I suppose. But a little chivalry wouldn't hurt."

"You've already depleted my reserves of chivalry, madam."

She blinked. "How so?"

"By requiring...and receiving...a death-defying rescue when last we met."

"I really don't think 'rescue' is the correct term."

"Semantics aside, you cannot argue how chivalrous the act itself was."

"Quite so," she said with a smile. "You win a point for chivalry. But what about charming? Have you depleted those reserves, as well?"

"I'm surprised you have to ask. Have I not been the epitome of charming?"

"Yes, what woman could resist the charm of being propositioned for mid-air sex?"

"Need I remind you the airborne position was your idea? I have no aversion to beds. Or walls, for that matter."

She had opened her mouth to argue, but she couldn't help laughing, instead. His teasing manner felt so natural, and the appeal of his roguish grin was too much to resist. The past melted into oblivion...it felt as if they'd always engaged in familiar banter. Her logical nature demanded she examine the ways their relationship had changed, but she hesitated, determined to enjoy the ride for however long it lasted.

They grew serious as the actual flying lesson commenced, and within three hours, all vestiges of humour were forgotten and all memories of enjoyment had vanished.

The sun dipped towards the horizon and danced upon the treetops. Frustration settled upon Hermione, along with the bitter taste of failure. She was no closer to achieving flight than when they'd first begun and had failed to lift her body more than a few inches into the air. Her success in leaving the ground on those occasions was the result of her hopping about like an overgrown rabbit. Not an auspicious beginning.

The only positive note had been Severus's extreme level of patience. She'd never considered him a particularly nurturing teacher; he had always seemed so irritable and angry. And yet he had spent the past three hours attempting to train her without once scowling, frowning, or saying anything the least bit snarky. Somehow, she found this even more disconcerting than her lack of progress.

"Just concentrate, Hermione," he said for what had to be the hundredth time. "Focus all your thoughts into one spot."

"I am," she lied. The ability to focus had proved impossible. Although her efforts were genuine, her attention kept straying, captured by his scent, his voice, his hands on her hips urging her aloft. It was pointless. The only thing she'd managed to accomplish thus far was making herself very aware of her body's reactions to him.

"Are you concentrating?" he asked.

"Sure." *Sort of.*

"Good. Now... lift!" He placed his hands on her waist.

Oh, my!

She jumped, but she imagined they both knew the result was completely devoid of magic. Her boot stomped into the ground. Never one to be pleased with a poor performance, the fact that she had wanted to impress her former professor only compounded her anger.

"It's just a matter of manipulating your power, your body, and the space around you in perfect harmony," he said.

"Oh, is that all?" She sighed.

He had attempted to explain the almost metaphysical process required to achieve flight, and she had devoured every morsel of his information. But even with his vast knowledge, he seemed to have difficulty articulating exactly how the phenomenon was accomplished.

"Everything around us has mass and depth, whether it's visible or not," he told her. "One mass cannot shift without displacing another."

"Okay," she said. She was a bright witch...why was this so difficult?

Already, his explanations had surpassed everything she'd found in the few books that referenced the magic of flight. Her insistence on being able to learn without the use of a book hadn't stopped her from exhaustive research prior to their lesson. But little had been documented on the skill. Although unrelated, she had uncovered countless tomes about non-magical aerodynamics. She now understood the science behind Muggle flight, and she possessed a deep appreciation for the combination of thrust and lift needed to propel jet airplanes. Somehow, this had only made it harder to accept a similar feat being accomplished magically, without the aid of wand or incantation.

"Is this how you learnt to fly?" she asked.

"No," he replied, too fast.

"How many sessions did it take you to learn?"

"Three." His voice rang with a note of finality.

"Well, if not like this, then *how* did you learn?"

"It's unimportant. Stop allowing yourself to become distracted. Focus on the task at hand."

"I won't be able to focus with unanswered questions in my head."

He sighed. "Then perhaps we were wise not to wager money on these lessons."

"Don't try to change the subject."

"Drop it, Hermione."

"Why won't you tell me how you learnt?"

"Because it doesn't bear repeating!" His patience had evidently found its limit. "The Dark Lord did not tolerate failure, or have you forgotten? I drowned during the first lesson and suffocated at the second. I learnt just in time to avoid being burnt alive by his teaching methods." He swiped his hand down his face, as if he could erase the memories. His voice sounded raw. "I still have no idea whether he would have spared my life that last time. Fortunately, I flew away and never had to find out."

She tried to swallow past the dryness in her mouth. Her throat constricted, refusing to cooperate. He would likely shun her sympathies, but she couldn't hide her sorrow for making him relive the nightmare experience. Her stomach twisted. "I'm so sorry, Severus," she said and touched his arm. "I'm such an idiot to not consider how horrific it must have been to learn from someone so twisted."

"It hardly matters anymore."

"Of course it does," she whispered.

He shook his head and closed his eyes. When he reopened them, his expression was even, and he appeared calm once more. "May we proceed with the lesson now?"

"Yes," she told him, still fighting guilt. "But I really am sorry."

He acknowledged the apology with a nod before asking, "Now, where were we?"

"You were explaining ascension, and I was finding it impossible to focus," she replied, pleased with the opportunity to provide a correct answer.

"Then that is the first thing we should address." His long strides brought him very close, very fast. He raised his hands so his palms faced her, as if he desired a game of pat-a-cake.

Her curiosity was piqued. His hands moved closer, until they were perfectly framed in her line of sight. There was nothing to distract from the sight of his lovely fingers, inches from her body.

"Now, concentrate on my hands," he said.

Absolutely. She eyed the long, elegant fingers and memorised each centimetre of perfection.

"Empty your mind of everything but the sight of my hands and the space around them."

Happy to tackle such an enjoyable task, she focused her thoughts as instructed.

"Excellent," he said. "Now, channel your energy into pushing my hands back, using only your mind."

She studied the intricate lines and swirls of his fingerprints, the small callous on his middle finger where he held his quill, the smooth expanse of his palms. *Push him away? Never!* All she could think of was the way those strong hands would feel on her body. She pictured his palms resting on her shoulders, sliding down...

"Think of my hands, and the space around them," he said.

... his fingers caressing her throat, slowly moving down her chest ...

"Concentrate. Push my hands, Hermione."

... his hands cupping her breasts, rough skin brushing against her nipples, coaxing them to tighten and tingle...

"Move my hands. Move the air."

... his fingertips on her hardened nipples, teasing and rubbing, soft strokes and light pinches...

"My hands... the air. Hands... air."

His hands twitched once, then flew through the air. They rocketed across the small distance and latched onto her chest, one hand squeezing each breast. The speed and force caused her to stumble back, yet still he held fast.

She gasped. A mixture of shock and awareness heated her cheeks.

"Hermione!" he shouted and yanked his hands away as if he'd been burnt.

"What?" she asked, bewildered.

He stared at her, his expression scandalised.

The realisation hit her like lightning. "Did I do that?" She clapped a hand over her mouth, just in time to stifle a rather inappropriate giggle.

Whatever embarrassment she might have felt was quickly replaced with relief for having accomplished the task he'd assigned her. Sort of.

"You were supposed to be pushing, not pulling."

She waved him away. "Oh, hush! I need to think about how I just did that." She turned her back and stared into the empty field.

Many thanks to Karelia for her beta efforts on this story. I owe her!!

Love Me Do

Chapter 10 of 20

Hermione is a quick learner.

Chapter 10: Love Me Do

While Severus filled the encroaching darkness with a Conjured lantern, Hermione thought back to his words and tried to remember what had finally clicked in her mind. He had instructed her to concentrate on both his hands and the space around him. Always before, she had focused solely on her body and lifting it into the air. But perhaps if she also thought about the space around her body, as she had done with Severus's hands, it might work in a similar fashion.

She closed her eyes, her chin down. Power surged through her body, and she pulled it into her mind until it buzzed like a thousand angry bees. She thought about the air above her, the precise spot her body needed to be. Then she focused on the space currently occupied by her body. In her mind, she saw the spaces shift, top exchanged for bottom, air for ground. Beads of sweat appeared on her upper lip, so intense was her concentration. She did not notice. Her mind was entirely occupied by the intangible spaces and the need to manipulate them. She willed them into motion, and all at once it became so clear, so simple. The most natural thing in the world. She felt the breeze stir her hair and opened her eyes with a smile. Her head was level with the treetops.

Yes!

She tested her new ability and repeated the steps until she rose higher. As she gained altitude, the air became chilled and thin, but she delighted in the frosty evening. Her confidence grew. Gradually, she was able to relinquish some of the all-consuming focus and allow her thoughts to stray. She felt like a baby who had just learnt to walk,

moving from uncertain to unstoppable in the blink of an eye. After several minutes, her subconscious assumed the role of navigator. She no longer had to envision or fixate on each and every step. The jerky starts and stops soon gave way to smooth, graceful arcs. She experimented with speed, seeing just how fast and then how slow she could go. To fly through the air, in complete control and yet totally unrestrained, was the most liberating experience she'd known, far surpassing anything she'd imagined. She made a sweeping circle around the perimeter of the field and then twirled in a mid-air spiral, like a flying ballerina, laughter spilling forth from the sheer delight of such freedom, such exhilaration.

"Show-off," said a deep voice behind her.

She stopped spinning and turned. Severus moved towards her through the air, his arms crossed. The bored expression on his face couldn't quite hide the admiration in his eyes. She beamed a smile, and when he returned it, she flew at him, throwing her arms around his neck and covering his mouth with noisy, wet kisses.

If her actions surprised him, he recovered quickly. His arms wound around her back and pulled her against his chest. Hungry lips found hers, greedy and demanding as he manoeuvred their bodies to the ground.

He deepened the kiss, and although her brain told her to proceed with caution, she ignored it and opened her mouth. She shivered when his tongue swept against hers. Her arms tightened around his neck. Desire formed a knot within her, a desperate pull that only grew stronger, eager for more.

More.

That's what she wanted... needed. More. Now.

And then what?

The question niggled at her, cooling her blood. She suspected that having more of him right now would only leaving her wanting even more later. And not in a purely physical sense, either. It was enough to temper the longing. She drew back, a slow retreat from a battle she wasn't prepared to surrender.

He gazed at her. Desire coloured his face, dark and raw. His shoulders rose and fell with his rapid, deep breaths. He seemed to hover on the edges of control, but he slowly lowered his arms and straightened his back.

"I did it," she whispered with a smile. "I flew."

"I noticed."

"You're a wonderful instructor," she said.

He snorted. "This is the first time anyone has accused me of that."

"Thank you so much for teaching me."

"You're welcome."

"Too bad you didn't take my wager," she said. "I cannot believe we were able to do that in one lesson."

His brows drew together. "You won't require any more lessons," he said.

"No," she agreed with a chuckle. It was quite unlike him to state the obvious. And was that disappointment she saw on his face?

"But you will still attend the Ministry ball with me." His tone did not question—it commanded.

"Of course. Are you going to dance with me at the ball?"

He grimaced. "Are you going to require such foolishness?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"Then I could hardly escape it," he said and inclined his head. "I'm quite obviously yours to command."

She felt another pang of longing, but this was much different than the lust and desire she'd just experienced. She placed her hand on his cheek. "If only that were true."

He seemed embarrassed by the turn of conversation and stepped away. His formal bow made her smile. "I will see you on the nineteenth," he said, naming the date of the ball.

"Goodbye," she whispered as he spun from view.

She chewed on her lower lip, deep in thought. Although the idea of a relationship with Severus Snape had seemed the most ridiculous thing in the world just a month ago, she couldn't imagine anything she wanted more right now. But how to convince *him* of that? Gathering her cloak, she turned and Disapparated. The snap of determination echoed in her head.

She had some *serious* shopping to do.

My heartfelt thanks, as always, go to Karelia for her beta skills.

Here Comes The Sun

Chapter 11 of 20

Every girl needs a little black dress.

Chapter 11: Here Comes the Sun

Brisk autumn air barrelled through the city streets, whistling a tuneless melody as it roiled the fallen leaves. Severus pulled his cloak tighter. He donned his reading glasses and peered at the note in his hand, remembering the rather impatient owl that had delivered it precisely one week earlier.

Dear Severus,

The details of our joint attendance at the Ministry ball appear to have been overlooked during our previous meetings. Since you have failed to initiate any contact with me over the past few weeks, I have taken the liberty of sending the address of my flat to you. As you've demanded invited me to attend this event with you, gentlemanly behaviour would require your presence at my domicile prior to the gathering in order for you to properly escort me. As such, I will expect your arrival promptly at 1900.

Regards,

Hermione

He smirked and memorised the address before tucking the sheet back inside his pocket. He scanned the buildings for the appropriate number, mentally preparing himself to find the woman inside every bit as perturbed as the tone of the note.

In truth, he had considered contacting her several times since their flying lesson. His thoughts had drifted to her with ever-increasing frequency, but always at the most inappropriate of moments. She was becoming a distraction, and that simply could not be allowed.

Countless times since their last meeting, the image of her face would suddenly appear to him, and the sound of her laughter seemed to float on the breeze. There were days when everything seemed to remind him of her scent. He was continually turning his head in the middle of a crowd, certain he had seen her. Heard her. Smelled her. Of course, he had always been mistaken. The resulting sense of disappointment had ceased to surprise him. It still rankled, though.

To prove he was immune to such weakness, he had pushed away all desire to seek an audience with her. The letters he had penned had been torn to pieces, their residence in the kindling basket a far more appropriate employment. And although he had begun to meet with Kingsley at the Ministry, he had resisted the temptation of a diversion to Hermione's office. If Kingsley had found his sudden, constant presence at the Ministry a bid odd, he had wisely refrained from commenting.

Locating the address from the note, Severus rang the bell and was immediately buzzed through to the foyer. He climbed several staircases and rapped on the door, only to find it slightly ajar.

"Come in, Severus," she called from inside. "I'm almost ready."

"I was ordered to be here promptly at seven," he called back and closed the door behind him.

"Yes, yes, you're very good," she said from another room. "I'll only be a minute. Make yourself at home."

He removed his cloak and surveyed the small space with a critical gaze. It wasn't much more than one large room, and 'large' was probably too generous. There were books and bookcases everywhere, severely outnumbering any other furnishings. A small sofa and chair had been arranged near the door, a sitting room in miniature. In the opposite corner was a small kitchen, and across from that, a section had been cordoned off with decorative, Oriental screens to function as a bedroom. She had filled the walls with art prints and seemed to favour one artist per room: Van Gogh in the kitchen, Monet over the bed, Gauguin above her desk. Turning back to the sitting area, he noted a bizarre mixture of Klimt and Vermeer.

Heels clicked on the wooden floor behind him, announcing her approach. "Your decorating scheme is rather eclectic in this room," he said before he turned to face her. He was immensely glad he'd finished speaking, as her appearance forced the blood in his body to rush lower while his brain ceased all functions.

Her unruly curls were tamed into sleek waves that framed her face and caressed her shoulders. She had found a dress that exceeded his imagination, even with the astounding description she had previously promised. The clingy black material perfectly showcased her figure, hugging her waist before draping over her hips. A deep V-neckline drew his eyes and revealed a tantalising glimpse of creamy skin. Tiny, gem-encrusted straps trailed over her collarbone, rising up and over to tie behind her neck.

Her smile lit her face as she gazed at the pictures he had just referenced. "I was contemplating a change last night," she explained while she grabbed her wand from an end table. She waved it at the wall. Inside the frames, the canvases shimmered and changed, until several more Klimt prints had joined the first. His gaze narrowed on the largest, a passionate depiction of a dark-haired man kissing a brown-haired woman. The obvious symbolism only tightened the pressure in his groin.

"Would you care for a drink before we leave?" she asked.

He nodded and managed to croak out, "Please."

She crossed the room and stopped at a crystal decanter near the bookcase. A generous pour of whisky went into a glass, and after a brief pause, she snagged a second glass and filled it, as well.

He stared at the back of the dress, or rather, the lack thereof: it was even more mind-boggling than the front. The tiny straps were tied into a careless bow behind her neck. The ends of the long strings sported glittery beads that dangled and swung along her bare back with every movement. Other than the minuscule threads, there appeared to be nothing holding the dress up. He frowned in concentration, trying to fathom how the sides and bottom of the dress clung to her curves rather than gaping ridiculously.

She turned, and his breath caught again. He barely registered her nervous smile as she walked to him. It took all his concentration to not ogle the flash of leg beneath the long slit running up one side of her dress.

He took the drink she pressed into his hand and clutched it like a lifeline.

"Do you like my dress?" she asked. Her eyes watched him over the rim of crystal glass, sparkling with untold secrets, the ancient mysteries of woman worshipped by man.

"Very much," he replied, alarmed by how rough his voice sounded. "How... how does it stay up?"

"Magic," she answered with a grin. She clinked her glass against his and said, "Cheers."

"Indeed," he replied, taking a welcome gulp of the fiery whisky.

She sipped her drink, then appraised him from head to toe. "You look quite dashing in formal wear," she said.

"Naturally," he replied. He smirked when she rolled her eyes. "And you look beautiful tonight."

"Naturally," she said with a laugh. She walked to the sofa and sat, legs crossed before her. He couldn't help it now: his gaze was glued to the slit in her dress and the stocking-clad wonders revealed within. She beckoned him to join her, patting the sofa cushion in invitation when he hesitated.

He felt a compulsion to glance behind him, in case her gesture was meant for another. Everything seemed surreal, like he had stepped into someone else's life and was watching a scene play out before him. Or perhaps he was just dreaming. One thing was certain: if this was nothing more than an elaborate dream, he would cause serious harm to whomever tried to awaken him.

Karelia provided beta services for this story. She rocks.

In My Life

Chapter 12 of 20

Severus discusses the past.

Chapter 12: In My Life

Severus paused for a moment, wondering just what he was doing in Hermione's flat. She was so young, so full of life. Why was she interested in a relationship with someone like him? Surely, she had men swarming around her like flies to honey.

Taking the seat beside her, he asked, "Why haven't you attended the Ministry balls in the past?"

She shrugged. "It's not the type of event a woman enjoys frequenting alone."

"No one's ever asked you?" he asked. "I find that hard to believe."

"It's the truth," she told him. "You read the newspaper—you must have some notion of why people avoid me."

"I ignore the gossip section."

"Ah, that's very wise. I assure you, you haven't missed much—at least, not much that's true." She took another sip of her drink, quite a bit larger than the last.

"The truth rarely sells newspapers."

"Too right."

"What atrocities have they misreported now?"

"Nothing too serious." She laughed, but the hurt in her eyes belied her humour. She looked away and said, "Oh, it doesn't matter, I suppose. You know how horrid the press can be. The only thing better than a hero is a fallen hero. The *Prophet* had great fun turning me into a harpy. And I believe the latest exposé from *Full Moon Monthly* suggests that I prefer women to men."

He snorted, not entirely surprised by her revelation.

"And so what if I do?" she asked. Indignation squared her shoulders. "How is that anyone's business but my own?"

"It's not."

"Of course it's not. I swear, Severus, sometimes this world is so bloody archaic, it just makes me want to scream. Suppose I did want to be with a woman—it's not as if there's anything wrong with that."

"Not at all."

"Then why are you smirking?"

"I was merely going to suggest that should you feel compelled to have relations with another woman, I'd be happy to ... nayobliged to witness the proceedings and offer my assistance."

"Stop trying to make me laugh. This is serious." She chuckled in spite of her warning. "In fact, you should really think about your reputation before you show up with me at the ball. I'm damaged goods, you know."

"Don't ever say that!" He spat the words with more vehemence than he'd intended. After a deep breath, he said, "You know that's not true."

She watched him for a moment, then nodded. "It's human nature, I suppose. People love to believe the worst."

"Some people, yes," he agreed.

She frowned at the floor. "Everyone believed the worst about you, didn't they?" Her tone was soft, completely at odds with her fierce expression as she turned her gaze upon him.

"In most instances it happened to coincide with the truth," he told her, wary of the worshipping light creeping into her eyes. "And it served my purpose at the time. It would be most unwise for you to attach any Byronic hero trappings to me, Hermione. I doubt either of us would be pleased with the outcome."

"I'm not romanticising your role," she said. "I simply find it disturbing that you worked so hard for the Order and yet so few trusted you."

"Did you trust me?"

"I trusted Dumbledore," she replied without hesitation. "I trusted that he must have had a terribly strong reason to believe in you, which I pointed out to the boys." She looked into her drink and spoke in a whisper. "But when Dumbledore... died..."

"When I murdered Dumbledore, you mean?"

Her eyes widened. "He... he was dying."

"True." He nodded. "But haven't you ever wondered if something—*anything*—could have been done to cure him?"

The shock on her face turned to horror. "It... it wouldn't have mattered. You had made an Unbreakable Vow."

"Also true. Dumbledore was quite concerned with young Draco's soul." Bitterness crept into his tone, jagged and raw like a dull knife ripping through flesh.

The sudden urge to discuss the complexities of his past was baffling. He hadn't confided these thoughts to anyone but Kingsley, long ago and under the influence of far too much Firewhisky. Perhaps a part of him needed to test her, to push her away by reminding her of the awful things he'd done in his life. She already knew more than most—she knew he'd overheard that blasted prophecy, that he'd caused the Potters' deaths. Incredibly, the knowledge hadn't deterred the tenacious little witch from desiring a relationship with him. But perhaps the reminder of how he had killed her beloved headmaster would change her mind.

Her brows drew together while she stared at the floor.

"I understand why Dumbledore didn't want Draco to perform the killing curse." She spoke slower than he'd ever heard her speak before, as if she chose each word with the utmost care. "He was a wise man, and there was a time when I would have defended his actions to the very end. But I can't help but think he made a great many mistakes... the situation with Sirius... the lies he told Harry... all those secrets. And he used you inexcusably, Severus."

She placed her hand on his leg.

He met her gaze and stared into unwavering loyalty. Confidence smoothed her features and made argument seem like utter folly. He opened his mouth to speak, but words failed him. Something tightened inside his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs. He had to look away just to breathe. Raising his glass to his lips, he drained the remainder of his whisky in several deep swallows. He had no idea how to respond to this kind of faith.

Setting aside his glass, he said, "Dumbledore used a great many people; I am certainly not alone or unique in that regard. However, it was also Dumbledore who noticed my portrait was missing from the headmaster's office when I was presumed dead, without which I would not be here today."

She looked away. He wondered if she blamed herself for being one of those who had left him for dead in the Shrieking Shack. The notion was ridiculous, but he filed it away for a future discussion.

"You see the irony, I'm sure. Dumbledore demanded my soul, but he also saved my life. Only time will tell who made the better bargain."

He rose from the sofa and held out his hand. "Come. That's enough talk of tattered souls and pointless regrets. You look far too gorgeous to spend the evening on such topics. Shall we go?"

She nodded and retrieved her cloak, apparently deep in thought as she walked to the door. He sensed anti-Apparition wards, confirmed when she led them to a spot in the corridor where she must typically Disapparate. She turned to face him, sliding her arms along his chest before winding them behind his neck. His hands circled her waist automatically. It was startling how familiar—how easy—it had become to embrace her.

"For what it's worth, Severus, you definitely made the better bargain." Her eyes sought his. "Dumbledore might have gambled with your soul, but I happen to know it's still your own, complete and undamaged."

"How can you possibly know that?" he asked, uncomfortable with her certainty.

"Because I wouldn't feel this way about you if it weren't."

He lifted one eyebrow. Before he could chide her foolishness, she rose on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his, cutting off any protest he might have made. He was lost in the depth of her kiss, full of passion and conviction and the promise of so much more. His mind whirled as if he were drunk, but then he realised they were both spinning: she was Apparating them to the Ministry ball.

My thanks to Karelia, who dropped everything to beta this simple little one-shot that grew into a monster. She's awesome.

Helter Skelter

Chapter 13 of 20

The wrong man claims the first dance.

Chapter 13: Helter Skelter

Hermione broke the kiss an instant before their Apparition into the Ministry of Magic. She threaded her arm through Severus's, unable to hide her smile as they strolled through the atrium. Tiny lights sparkled overhead like thousands of fireflies. Across the room, an enchanted orchestra played while couples glided across the marble dance floor.

"Drink?" asked Severus.

"Definitely." She stood beside an exotic palm tree, beneath a canopy of purple fronds, and admired her date's broad shoulders as he walked to the crowded bar.

Although she'd become skilled at ignoring the sound of gossip, she couldn't help notice the whispers grew to a steady hiss as she stood there, alone. She fixed her gaze upon Severus. The casual way he leant against the bar...and the memory of the kiss they'd just shared...brought a sense of peace that made it easier to dismiss the curious eyes upon her. Still, she had to fight the urge to fidget with her dress.

When she'd first found the gown, she had wondered if it was too revealing, if she should consider something more modest. But she had overruled the thought in a small fit of temper, knowing it would hardly matter. If the dress flattered her body, the papers would suggest she had loose morals...but if it covered her curves, no doubt they'd brand her a dowdy spinster. In the end, she had made her selection based on what she had liked best, and what she had thought Severus might enjoy. Judging from his reaction when he'd first seen the dress...and the possessive looks he kept throwing her way...she had chosen well.

He returned with drinks in hand. Their fingers brushed as she took the glass, and her skin tingled, just as it had when he'd first discovered her alone in an empty field, stranded by her co-workers. The room seemed to fade when their eyes met. The other couples disappeared. She could no longer hear the music. Even the whispers quieted, as if they had descended to the bottom of the ocean. They could have been the only two people in the room. Perhaps that was why she failed to notice the pale witch and wizard who had arrived beside them.

"Severus! Good to see you, old friend," said Lucius Malfoy.

She hadn't heard the voice in several years, but the familiar drawl sent a chill down her spine. Memories of being taken to Malfoy Manor by the Snatchers still had the power to infiltrate her dreams and had been the cause of more than one nightmare.

Severus offered his greetings, shaking Lucius's hand and kissing Narcissa's cheek. He shifted his body to draw Hermione into their circle. His hand stayed on the small of her back. "I daresay you remember Miss Granger."

"Of course," said Lucius. Crystalline grey eyes scrutinised her. "It's a pleasure to see you here, Miss Granger."

She nodded but couldn't bring herself to echo his sentiments. The Malfoys might have renounced Dark Magic, but their timely change of heart felt a bit too convenient. She suspected their willingness to provide vast financial support towards bringing peace to the wizarding world had helped sway the tide of public opinion in their favour. Perhaps one day, she would appreciate the irony of the former Death Eaters becoming such media darlings, while she was more maligned than the English weather. At least their Galleons went to charity now, a definite improvement over white peacocks.

"What a stunning dress, Miss Granger," said Narcissa.

Hermione searched her face for the lie, surprised by the lack of sarcasm in her tone. Her sentiment appeared to be genuine.

"Thank you." She smiled self-consciously, then complimented the elegant cobalt gown worn by the older woman. Narcissa had always been beautiful, albeit in a rather cold, brittle way. But tonight she looked softer somehow: even her expression bordered on approachable. Her blue eyes studied the unusual tree they stood beneath, and when Hermione confessed her ignorance of the species, Narcissa launched into a thorough history and description for her benefit. It seemed the witch had a surprising affinity...and talent...for botany.

The men stood to the side, deep in conversation. Their hushed tones indicated a desire for privacy, so Hermione continued her chat with Narcissa. She was surprised to feel comfortable...almost relaxed...in her presence. Perhaps she had been too hasty in her condemnation. After all, Narcissa had lied to Voldemort, effectively saving Harry's life, just to obtain information about her son's welfare. Her role as a loving parent was a point in her favour.

Hermione turned her attention to the orchestra as they began to play a waltz. Lucius appeared at her side and said, "Will you grant me the pleasure of a dance, Miss Granger?"

She glanced at Severus, but his face was frustratingly impassive. "I'm afraid I'm a rather dreadful dancer, Mr Malfoy," she said and shook her head. Her opinion of Narcissa might have changed, but she wasn't quite ready to provide Lucius the same reprieve.

Severus contradicted her. "Your skills were far from dreadful when you led the opening dance at the Yule ball," he said quietly. "As I recall, you were the very picture of grace under pressure. The entire room was watching, yet you never missed a step. Surely, you haven't forgotten."

An odd sort of fluttering travelled through her stomach. Of course she hadn't forgotten the Yule ball. But she would never have guessed her disagreeable Potions professor had been among those watching her dance. Or that the Malfoys' presence would not stop him confessing the recollection.

"Then it's settled." Lucius captured her hand and offered a smooth smile. "Come, Miss Granger. There's no need for such modesty."

She looked at Severus again and frowned. She had no desire to insult a friend of his, and by extension, him. But she could think of a great number of things she'd rather do than dance with Lucius Malfoy.

As if sensing her indecision, Severus scowled but jerked his head towards the dance floor. "There'll be no peace until you agree, I'm afraid. Lucius wants to prove he can be charming when the mood strikes him."

Light, feminine laughter sounded from Narcissa, but Lucius just clucked his tongue and shook his head. She suspected a great deal of his affrontedness was exaggerated, but she allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. At least she recognised the waltz and knew its brevity offered the promise of a speedy escape.

They turned circles around the other couples, and after a few moments, Lucius spoke. "Severus was correct. You dance beautifully."

"Mm." Panic-filled memories played through her mind and eliminated any compunction she might have felt to offer a polite response.

He glanced at the area where they had left their partners. "I suppose I shouldn't have stolen you from Severus so quickly."

"Then why did you?" she asked, in no mood for games.

He blanched at her tone and avoided her question. "It gives me great pleasure to see you here with Severus."

She snorted. "Is that so?" She doubted he was ever pleased to see a Muggle-born.

"Indeed. I must confess, I was rather surprised when he told me whom he would escort to the Ministry ball. But after seeing you both together tonight, I fully support the decision. Why, I haven't seen Severus act this way since Li..."

Pale brows drew together, and he acted as if he'd said too much. He cleared his throat and finished, "I haven't seen him like this in a very long time, and it's quite obviously a result of your influence. Therefore, I approve."

She regarded him with a raised eyebrow. Was he telling the truth about Severus's behaviour, or was this all a ruse? She could easily believe Lucius capable of having a hidden agenda. What possible motivation could he have for saying such things unless he was working some unknown angle? It seemed as if he'd been about to mention Lily, but staging such a slip was a simple enough matter. She was not prepared to grant him the benefit of doubt.

"Mr Malfoy, I don't think I can begin to quantify how little your approval means to me."

"Well, this is a dreadful beginning," he said. "If you refuse to accept my commendation, what hope do I have to secure your forgiveness?"

"My forgiveness?" she asked, certain she'd misunderstood him.

"That is correct. I am here to beseech your forgiveness."

"You want me ... to forgive *you*?"

"As I've stated."

He couldn't be serious. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's all quite simple and straightforward, I assure you. I tell you how sorry I am for my past transgressions, and I apologise for any pain or trauma you suffered by my actions or orders. Then you offer your forgiveness, and we all move forward."

She stared at him, unblinking. He couldn't have stunned her more if he'd used *Stupefy*. "And I assume this was your ultimate purpose in asking me to dance?"

"It was," he confirmed.

She blinked at last, several times in case she was dreaming. Or being teased. It wouldn't be the first time she'd fallen victim to someone's idea of a practical joke. She watched him carefully, dumbstruck to realise he seemed genuine. But how was she supposed to respond to such an extraordinary request?

"I'm afraid it's not that easy."

He sighed. "No, I didn't imagine it would be."

And yet he continued to study her, his expression expectant, as if absolution might come at any moment. She supposed he was accustomed to acquiescence; surely every request he made was instantly fulfilled. Only sheer arrogance would make him think she could forget the past simply because he snapped his fingers and asked her to.

Anger bubbled up inside her. "You tried to kill me, Mr Malfoy, when Harry retrieved the prophecy. Right here. In this very building."

"And I was duly incarcerated for my crimes," he reminded her.

"But less than two years later, you tried again. You ordered the Snatchers to bring us to your house. My friends and I nearly died."

"Yes." He nodded and had the decency to appear pained by the reminder. "I'm terribly sorry about that."

"You sat back and watched as your sister-in-law tortured me, and you did nothing when she offered me as a prize to your werewolf henchman."

"Well when you put it that way, I suppose it does sound rather unforgivable."

Something like laughter escaped her throat: part incredulous humour, part raw hysteria. "It's not the phrasing that makes it unforgivable, Mr Malfoy. It's the actions, themselves!"

"Exactly!" His expression turned fierce. "That is precisely why I wish to apologise for those actions."

She shook her head and closed her eyes, oblivious to the movements of her feet as they continue to carry her around the dance floor. "This is the last thing I expected to encounter tonight."

"I understand, and I further apologise for having blindsided you. But surely, we must start somewhere?"

"I suppose," she said, uncertainty drawing her brows together.

Redemption was a tricky business. While she fervently believed Severus had earned his forgiveness, Lucius Malfoy was another matter entirely. She replayed their conversation in her head while she considered his request.

He did seem remorseful, so perhaps he possessed some form of a conscience, after all. And he appeared eager for the opportunity to apologise. It was more of an overture than she'd expected, certainly more than she had ever believed him capable of. She sensed yet another paradigm about to shift and wondered how many more surprises she could handle in the course of one evening.

Grateful glomps to Karelia for her mad beta skillz.

Can't Buy Me Love

Chapter 14 of 20

Hermione receives an unexpected offer.

Chapter 14: Can't Buy Me Love

The music built to a spirited crescendo and then faded as the dance ended. Hermione broke away from Lucius and stood beside him on the dance floor, applauding the orchestra. She turned to leave when the next song began, but he reached for her hand again. "One more dance, Miss Granger."

"I'd rather not," she said. Her tone was more honest than harsh.

"Please," he said, grey eyes imploring. "I have a proposition for you."

She wasn't sure if it was his plea or her own curiosity, but she returned to his arms before her brain had fully approved. He swept her across the floor, moving in perfect rhythm to the strains of a Khachaturian waltz.

"How much?" His voice was suddenly business-like.

"Pardon me?"

"How much will it take before you are convinced of my sincerity?"

"How much of what?" she asked. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

He spoke each word slowly, as if he were addressing a child. "I'm asking you to forgive me."

"Yes, I got that part." She rolled her eyes.

"And I'm willing to compensate you handsomely for this one simple act of absolution."

Severus would have been proud of the scowl she produced. "Money is irrelevant in this situation, Mr Malfoy." He looked scandalised by the very thought, but she continued, "Forgiveness must be earned: it cannot be bought and sold like common property."

"I was afraid you would say that." He sighed, and although their bodies remained at a respectable distance, she could feel the weight of his shoulders as they dropped.

"That was your proposition?" she asked. "Did you really think you could buy my forgiveness?"

He offered a slight shrug. "I have achieved an adequate level of success with similar methods in the past."

"So you've bribed others into exonerating your actions?"

"That's a rather ugly way of saying it," he chastised. "I was merely offering a value exchange. What you insist on calling bribery, I consider nothing more than a fair payment for services rendered."

"Please. Spare me the lesson in semantics."

"Very well," he said tersely.

They danced in silence for several moments, twirling around the floor without thought to their surroundings.

"Are you aware that Malfoy Industries own the building in which you live?" he asked.

She paled. "Are you threatening to evict me if I don't accept your apology?"

His overly dramatic sigh stirred her hair, while his gaze rose to the ceiling. "You are determined to believe the worst of me, aren't you?"

"I have yet to be convinced I should believe otherwise."

"That is because you are an incredibly stubborn woman who chooses to wilfully misunderstand me."

"Mr Malfoy, if complimenting me didn't convince me to forgive you, I hardly think insulting me is a better approach."

"Then enlighten me, Miss Granger. What approach *would* work?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, feeling the heat of frustration colour her cheeks. "How about the truth?"

"I've been honest with you tonight!"

"Perhaps," she offered. "But tell me... Why now? It's been several years since Voldemort's demise—why the sudden need to apologise after all this time?"

"Should an apology be given less credence simply because it is long overdue?" he asked.

"Of course not," she replied. "But that still doesn't answer my question. Why now?"

"Miss Granger, it sounds as if you are questioning my motivation."

"I should think so, Mr Malfoy, as that is precisely what I am doing. Now, are you going to answer my question, or shall we end the dance here?" She gave him the space of four heartbeats to respond, then came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the floor.

He tried to guide her back into the dance, but she wouldn't budge. "Oh, very well," he said when their lack of motion began to draw attention. "You win."

She returned to his arms and resumed dancing, watching him expectantly.

After a moment of silence, he said, "Since it's so terribly important to you, I will admit the reason I sought your forgiveness tonight, rather than several years ago, is because of Severus and, to a greater extent, because of Draco."

She waited for him to explain, but he seemed reluctant. "Please elaborate," she said.

He pursed his lips together. "I was recently informed of the events taking place inside Hogwarts during that last battle—how you and your friends saved Draco from fiendfyre."

"In the Room of Requirement," she said, nodding absently.

"Yes. Narcissa and I are indebted to you."

"Not at all," she replied instantly. "To leave him there would have been unconscionable."

He ignored her protests. "We owe Severus a great deal, as well. He risked his life—and his soul—to protect Draco."

"He's a good man," she whispered.

"The best."

She frowned as his words sunk in. "But why would Severus's actions have anything to do with me?" she asked. She struggled to connect these long-ago events to Lucius's abrupt desire for forgiveness.

"I value Severus's friendship," he explained. "I have no wish to jeopardise it by having unresolved issues with someone he appears to care about."

For the second time that evening, the room seemed to fade from view. "That's very admirable of you," she intoned without thinking. Her mind was far too busy processing this new information, wondering if Lucius was correct in his assessment.

"Am I forgiven, then?" He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

She forced her brain away from thoughts of Severus's feelings for her and focused on their conversation. "I was merely confessing my admiration for your sentiments, Mr Malfoy. Nothing more."

"I believe you will find Gryffindors are not the only ones capable of loyalty, Miss Granger."

And Slytherins haven't cornered the market on cunning, she thought. She pasted a sweet smile on her face while a wicked idea formed in her mind.

Karelia + beta = awesome. Just sayin'.

A/N: I'm posting the chapters with Lucius in rapid succession, so don't despair if you're not a Malfoy fan—Severus will soon return. Believe me, I was quite surprised when Lucius showed up in this story, and if you're familiar with my writing, you'll know this is a fairly different take on his character for me. I'm not sure how it happened, but

somehow I'm sure it's all Karelia's fault.

Help!

Chapter 15 of 20

Hermione uses her negotiation skills on another Slytherin.

Chapter 15: Help!

After several moments of silent contemplation, Hermione looked at Lucius and said, "Mr Malfoy, if my forgiveness were for sale, I know precisely what you would find on the price tag."

"Excellent!" he replied, eyes sparkling with victory. "Give me a number, and we shall proceed from there."

She chuckled and shook her head. "I'm afraid *my* proposition does not involve an exchange of Galleons."

Dread filled his voice as he asked, "What then, pray tell?"

"I merely require the release of your house-elves from servitude."

He looked ill. "Oh, is that all?"

"Not quite." She ignored his sarcasm and plodded on. "I would also like your public support on this initiative ... your earnest encouragement for the rest of the wizarding world to follow your example."

He offered no reply for several moments. "I believe I have a better idea," he said finally. His smile was undoubtedly meant to be charming.

She wasn't swayed. "Let's hear it, then."

"I will assign you the deed to your flat. You will own it outright and need never worry about paying a landlord again."

"Tempting," she began, "but I'll have to pass."

"Come now, Miss Granger. It would make life so much easier ... for both of us."

"Ah, but there's that pesky little issue of choosing between what is easy and what is right," she said. "I'm certain you can guess which option I favour."

"No doubt," he said dryly. His expression turned beseeching. "But there must be something else you desire. *Anything...*"

She hid her grin. He was obviously used to getting his way, and his persistence held a certain boyish appeal.

"There's nothing else I desire from you," she assured him. "This is the issue dearest to my heart. I've been passionate about securing the release of house-elves for many, many years."

"House-elves are quite content with their station in life." He switched from boyish to imperious in record time. "You presume too much in thinking they desire the same liberties as you."

"I knew one who greatly desired his freedom." From the light of recognition in his eyes, she knew he understood of whom she spoke. "Isn't it a remarkable coincidence that the house-elf who started me on this path came from *your* home, Mr Malfoy?"

He grimaced, obviously not impressed with the irony. "Dobby was unique, Miss Granger, in more ways than you can imagine."

"And now he's dead." She spoke each word with the finality of a firing squad.

His step faltered slightly, almost imperceptibly.

"Mr Malfoy, I'm giving you the opportunity to atone for two sins with one decision. You're an intelligent businessman... Surely, you recognise a bargain when you see one."

She watched his face as they moved around the dance floor, pleased when he seemed to consider her suggestion.

"This is nowhere near as simple as you make it sound," he said at length. "Have you any notion how much effort such an undertaking would require?"

"Of course." She smiled. It was the opening she'd been waiting for. "I've spent the past year documenting requirements and defining the project scope. Naturally, we'll request assistance from the house-elves to develop and refine a comprehensive timeline. And we'll need to appoint a steering committee to monitor change controls, phase gates, and project life cycle. Progress will be measured via a series of benchmarks, with periodic reviews of key deliverables and risk assessment. Believe me, Mr Malfoy, I have not underestimated the time and management necessary for this to work. All the groundwork is in place, and with your cooperation, I have confidence we will achieve a successful implementation."

As she spoke, his eyes had taken on a dull, glazed look, and his jaw had slackened. With a slight shake of his head, he said, "Good lord, woman, you *are* perfect for Severus." He studied her curiously, one eyebrow marginally higher than the other. She could barely discern his words when he mumbled, "I cannot fathom how I have managed to surround myself with such swots."

"As I was saying ... the plan will work." She waited until she was certain she had his attention once more. "All it lacks is a respected member of the wizarding community to support the initiative. If you were to endorse this project—and lead by example—others would surely follow."

He studied her with narrowed eyes, as if she were some unpredictable substance growing in a Petri dish. "What if we were to forget your flat and expand the offer a bit? I might be persuaded to transfer the deed of the entire building to you ..."

"I'm afraid not," she said with a laugh.

With an exaggerated sigh, he asked, "And if I agree to meet with you and review what is bound to be an exceedingly detailed plan, will I have procured your pardon?"

"Reviewing the plan will help convince me of your sincerity," she told him, "but a full acquittal can only be secured by adopting the plan in its entirety. Do we have a deal?"

"One step at a time," he offered. "It would be foolish to commit until I have had an opportunity to read the plan and examine your research first-hand. However, barring anything utterly ridiculous, I am willing to offer my house-elves a fair wage for their services."

"Or their freedom, should they desire it?"

"Or their freedom," he agreed, rolling his eyes.

Even Hermione was forced to admit it was the rare elf who wished for freedom, but that aspect hardly mattered to her now. Giving them a choice—and adequate pay for their work—was an enormous step in the right direction.

"Excellent!" She beamed a genuine smile at him. Her campaign for house-elf rights had languished far too long without measurable progress. The goal was finally within reach. "I'll prepare a copy of the plan for you on Monday and have it sent to your office straightaway."

"Very well. Give me a week to peruse it. I will instruct my secretary to create an opening on my schedule so we can discuss the details in person."

The music had stopped, and as she stepped away from him, she said, "Assuming we can reach an agreement, I'd say you're close to having earned that forgiveness you sought."

She turned to applaud the orchestra, and he used the opportunity to lean closer and whisper in her ear. "How close?"

"You are truly incorrigible," she said with a chuckle. But because he seemed to be waiting for an answer, she said, "Very close," before walking away to search for Severus.

She wasn't sure when her feet had stopped moving. She barely even noticed when Lucius, who was following close behind, walked right into her. His apology went unanswered. Her attention was riveted to the site of Harry and Ginny entering the atrium, alongside Ron and a woman she had never seen before.

A few years earlier, a young American witch had taken an internship at the Ministry and had frequently used the term "skank-ho" to describe witches of a certain appearance. But not until she had gazed upon Ron's date did Hermione fully comprehend the expression in all its glory.

The witch who had glued herself to Ron's side wore an indecently short, tight-fitting dress in a metallic gold material that clashed fabulously with the unnatural blond streaks in her hair. She boasted unusually broad shoulders, and as tall as Ron was, she still towered over him. The shiny black platform heels only accentuated her Amazonian stature. And although Hermione was rarely prone to petty observations, one look convinced her there was *no way* those tits had not been magically enhanced.

Assaulted by a parade of emotions that ran the gamut from revulsion to amusement, she simply could not look away. It was like watching a walking, breathing train wreck, and all she could do was wonder how her evening could possibly get any more bizarre.

A/N: Okay, so it turns out forgiveness can be bought, after all. As always, my appreciation goes to Karelia for the zippy beta pass she provided.

Come Together

Chapter 16 of 20

Hermione gets a new dance partner.

Chapter 16: Come Together

Excited whispers spread through the crowd when Hermione stood immobile in the centre of the dance floor, staring at Ron and his date. Music rang forth from the orchestra, but she took no notice until Lucius stepped before her, blocking her view and effectively breaking her odd trance. In one swift move, he drew her back into position and deftly matched their steps to the new dance.

Her senses returned, chased back inside her brain by stark reality. Heat coloured her cheeks. She had likely just made quite a spectacle of herself, and for what? She cursed her foolishness and knew it was simply the shock of finding herself on the outside looking in. Seeing Ron alongside Harry and Ginny was so familiar, but now there was someone else in the place where she had once felt so comfortable. Not that she wanted the spot back. She had no interest in Ron and wondered what had ever possessed her to think they could be happy together. She didn't regret the loss. Having the details of their relationship bandied about in public had been harder to take than the break-up itself. She could understand...even sympathise with...drinking too much and confiding in the wrong person. But he had never once tried to set things right, and that was something she could not forgive. He remained, to this day, utterly clueless.

She chanced a glance at Lucius, dreading what she might find. But he wasn't even looking at her. Apparently, she wasn't the only one fascinated by Ron's date.

He tore his gaze away and frowned at Hermione. "Are her lips bleeding, or do you suppose she painted them like that on purpose?"

She hadn't noticed the garish, red rouge before, but a quick peek at the lips in question made her flinch.

He chuckled at her reaction.

"I'd assume it was intentional," she said. "I'm sure most men will be far too busy examining her chest to notice her mouth." The fact that Lucius didn't seem to be one of them shouldn't have mattered.

He cast another glance at Ron's date, then lifted his shoulders in a dismissive shrug. "Such women can be had for a Knut a scoop. Only a fool would choose something so cheap," he said with a nod towards Ron. His gaze returned to Hermione and lingered on her face. "Especially when he could have had beauty *and* intelligence."

"I think you're laying it on a bit thick now."

"I think you are being overly modest."

"Perhaps," she relented with a smile. "A little."

"Perhaps a great deal," he countered. "I do not say these things merely to flatter you, Miss Granger. I happen to be a connoisseur of women, and my opinion on such matters is unparalleled."

She chuckled. He seemed so serious, and her spirits were lifted more than she would have thought possible.

"This is hardly a laughing matter," he said. "I assure you, I recognise quality when I see it. You have it...she does not."

"Please ... no more," she said with a grin. "I officially forgive you."

He threw his head back and laughed, a deep, hearty sound, as rich as his vault at Gringotts. Several of their neighbours on the dance floor turned to stare.

"Don't think this means you get out of house-elf liberation, though," she clarified quickly.

"I would not dream of it," he said with apparent sincerity. "But this is excellent news!" He sobered quickly when he glanced at Severus. "And none too soon, it would seem. I believe your date might poison me, were I to continue manipulating your attention."

Her gaze found Severus, and she smiled. The scowl left his face when their eyes met and held. As the dance ended, Lucius ushered her to where he stood alone, his arms folded across his chest.

"I'm forgiven!" Lucius announced, somewhat boastful.

"You're losing your touch," Severus replied at once. "It took three dances to convince her."

Lucius leant in conspiratorially, but whispered loud enough for Hermione to hear. "Actually, she was completely charmed by the end of the second dance. The third was merely for my own enjoyment." He offered a cheeky wink to Hermione, who couldn't help but laugh.

"Are you quite done now?" asked Severus, unmoved by their mirth.

"Yes." Lucius rubbed his hands together slowly and looked as if he were reluctant to leave. "Where has Narcissa gone? I must inform her we are the new champions for house-elf equality."

Severus issued a loud bark of laughter. "You didn't?" He turned smiling eyes on Hermione.

Lucius raised an eyebrow, clearly not amused. "Your date is a more formidable negotiator than I had anticipated," he said. His look managed to convey equal amounts of exasperation and appreciation. Clapping Severus on the shoulder, he added, "I wish you the best of luck, my friend. You will likely need it."

Lucius took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Thank you for the charming company, Miss Granger. I look forward to our next meeting."

"As do I," she said, surprised to realise she meant it.

Lucius released her hand and stunned her by leaning forward to place a swift kiss upon her cheek. Then he strode away, undoubtedly to break the news regarding their servants to his wife.

"You'll want to watch yourself with that one," Severus said, jerking his head to indicate Lucius as he made his way through the crowd.

"Oh, I fully anticipate a battle ahead," she said, "but I'm well prepared."

"I wasn't referring to your plans for his house-elves," he replied cryptically. "Lucius has been known to invite himself along on certain... activities."

What?

"Affairs you might prefer more private..."

She stared at him questioningly, not fully comprehending his meaning until he shifted closer to her, his gaze blatant...verging on lewd...as it raked over her features and lingered on her lips.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, cheeks burning. "I can barely handle one man ... I'd have no clue how to handle two."

"I daresay you underestimate your man-handling abilities," he whispered. He shifted even closer. The front of his robes brushed her dress and a smile played along his lips. "But should you need someone to practice them on ..."

"Ah, the humble male test subject, eh?" She angled her neck so she could watch his eyes and moved closer, already anticipating the feel of his lips.

"Hermione!" said a voice behind her, so loud she jumped. She turned to find Harry watching her, a look of concern on his familiar face. She mumbled a quick hello and tried not to be irritated when he butchered his greeting to Severus.

"Will you dance with me, Hermione?" he asked.

"Maybe later, Harry," she told him. "I still haven't had a chance to dance with my date yet."

His green eyes surveyed the crowd with curiosity. "Right. Where's your date, then?"

In perfect unison, both Hermione and Severus rolled their eyes and pointed to one another. Harry's obvious shock was enough to keep her annoyance at bay. He seemed incapable of forming words, so he resorted to a rather comical display where his mouth kept opening and closing, again and again, as if an appropriate response would spring forth at any moment.

Turning to Severus, she jerked her thumb in Harry's direction. "Would you mind terribly if I danced with fish-boy here?" She was in no mood to spare Harry's feelings, and he really did resemble nothing so much as a fish out of water.

"By all means," said Severus, his tone gracious despite the look of dislike marring his features.

She trudged back to the dance floor with Harry in tow. "I thought you didn't care for dancing," she said.

"I hate it," he confirmed as they began to move in time to the music. "But I saw how you were stuck dancing with Lucius Malfoy, and then I thought Snape was threatening you..."

She interrupted him with a derisive sigh. "Would you *please* stop trying to save everyone?"

"I swear I didn't realise Snape was your date. Are you angry?"

"Yes, I'm angry. I don't need to be rescued from evil Slytherins, Harry. And I certainly don't need to be rescued from my date and my date's friend."

"I'm sorry." He looked away and shook his head. "It's been a rough night. Ginny's about to murder Ron, and I'm buggered because I forgot to tell her he was bringing that awful woman to the ball."

The thought of Ginny's wrath warmed her almost as much as Harry's description of Ron's date.

"To be honest," he whispered, "I'm not even sure she's *awoman*."

Their dance had led them closer to Ron, Ginny, and the unnamed witch, and a surreptitious peek lent credence to Harry's words. Hermione smiled at last. It would be rather appropriate to see Ron's cluelessness bite him in the arse. Literally.

Harry seemed to accept her smile for a peace offering. They danced in companionable silence for a moment, then he said, "So ... you and Snape, huh?"

"Yes," she replied. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No," he said instantly, sounded suitably repentant. "We owe him a lot, of course."

"Yes, we do."

"I have to admit I'm surprised, though. I guess I was still holding out hope for you and Ron."

"That's a waste of hope, Harry. It was a bad idea from the start."

He nodded. "I suppose it makes sense for you to be with an older guy. You're too smart for anyone our age. It's just... you know... *weird*... to see you and Snape together."

She scowled and said, "Well, it shouldn't be. We're not really a couple, after all...we just came to the ball together. After tonight, it's doubtful we'll ever see each other again." The thought soured her mood more than anything Harry had said or done.

"You really care for him!" he accused.

She looked into his eyes and contemplated the wisdom of denial. "Yes," she admitted finally.

"Then why do you seem so sad?" he asked. "Are you afraid he doesn't feel the same way about you?"

"I know he doesn't," she said. "He doesn't want a relationship. He's only interested in..." She trailed off, deep in thought.

When she left the ball, her life would return to the same old routine. No more flying lessons to anticipate, no more dances to plan. She would say goodbye to Severus Snape and somehow try to forget him.

Not so fast.

She was a grown woman, wasn't she? She was free to make whatever choices she wanted. And right now, she didn't at all feel like letting him slip through her fingers without first experiencing something... *more*.

Harry looked positively ill over the thought of what his former professor was actually interested in.

She laughed and abruptly ended their dance. "Thanks, Harry...I needed this conversation. Give my love to Ginny ... Tell her I'll owl her tomorrow."

She returned to Severus, unable to suppress the smile on her face.

"You look like you're up to something," he commented as she approached.

"I was thinking I'd had enough dancing."

He raised an eyebrow but said, "Ah, you've decided to spare yourself the humiliation of my two left feet."

"Actually, I was thinking I'd had enough of the ball entirely."

Disappointment raced across his face, gone so rapidly she'd have never seen it if she hadn't been paying attention.

"You wish to leave?" he asked.

"I do," she confirmed. "Will you escort me back to my flat?"

"Of course."

She slid her hand around his arm and ignored the hungry eyes watching them leave, the tongues that would soon be wagging. She supposed she could have timed their departure better...coming on the heels of Ron's arrival as it had would only increase the tittle-tattle. But for once, she really didn't care. Having made up her mind to seduce Severus tonight, she couldn't bear the thought of wasting another second at the ball. Her heart pounded as they entered the Apparition area. She could hardly wait to set her plan in motion.

A/N: My deepest thanks to Karelia for her fast beta of this story.

Twist and Shout

Chapter 17 of 20

Severus knows what he wants. Doesn't he?

Chapter 17: Twist and Shout

Severus stood in the hall outside Hermione's door and wondered about the secretive smile dancing on her lips. She felt good in his arms, too good to release. But she broke his gaze and drew away, leaving the space she'd occupied as cold as it was empty. She walked to her door and removed the wards while he stood motionless, teetering on the threshold of more than just her doorstep.

He should go. He had no business staying. He knew what she wanted just as surely as he knew he couldn't give it to her. His brain accepted the wisdom, but his feet refused to budge. She was completely different from the women he had known. Something told him she'd be damn near impossible to forget.

She pushed open the door to her flat and turned back to him. Soft light fell from the room, hiding her features while framing her silhouette in a golden glow. He wished he had positioned himself better, so he could read her expression. He wasn't even standing in a good spot for a long kiss goodbye. Perhaps it was just as well. Her lips would only leave him wanting more, and there was a great deal to consider before he could contemplate anything... *more*.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked.

What?

He walked to her slowly and studied her face. Flushed cheeks, heavy lids ... suddenly, the secretive smile made more sense.

"If I go in tonight, I'm not coming back out," he told her.

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave eventually. You'd look ridiculous wearing my clothes."

"That's not what I meant."

"I didn't think it was."

"Did I miss something?" he asked. "The last I checked, you weren't interested in meaningless...albeit satisfying...sex, and I didn't care for the idea of a committed relationship."

"Haven't you heard? It's a woman's prerogative to change her mind."

He snorted. "You are *not* a typical woman."

She frowned slightly, probably trying to determine whether she was being complimented or insulted. "I can change my mind when I feel like it."

"You've changed your mind?" There had to be a catch.

"Well, I'm not saying, 'come over anytime you fancy a shag.' But one night won't hurt anything, right?"

He wasn't so sure about that but thought it unwise to contradict her. And although he hated to risk his sudden good fortune, he couldn't help wondering what had precipitated the change of heart. "Are you certain you want to do this?" he asked.

"Aren't Slytherins supposed to be perceptive?" she asked, and he detected a trace of irritation in her voice. "I'm all but throwing myself at you, mate."

"I just don't want you to regret this tomorrow."

"I shan't," she said. The certainty in her words matched the expression on her face. She lifted her eyebrows and said, "Unless that's some sort of pre-emptive disclaimer about your performance?"

"Hardly."

"Look, we're both consenting adults who are attracted to each other," she reasoned. "One night together wasn't exactly what I was hoping for, but I'm willing to compromise."

"Yes, that's what always struck me about you...your overwhelming willingness to compromise."

She smiled and stepped closer to him. Her body brushed against his with the slightest of pressure, teasing, tempting. His cock was hard before she even spoke.

"Would you like me to convince you?" She placed her palms on his chest and sent them on an agonizing journey to the waistband of his trousers before sliding them behind his back. She moulded her body to his, the pressure no longer slight. "Don't even think about tomorrow."

He grunted. Forming words would require too much effort.

"Let's pretend there's only tonight," she whispered, and he could barely hear her over the sound of blood rushing through his veins. She touched her lips to the side of his mouth, then brushed them lightly across his lips.

"Hermione..."

"I didn't make you dance with me, Severus. You owe me something nice to remember you by."

He wondered when she had learnt how to make her voice purr. Her breath was warm against his skin. More feathery kisses covered his face, sweet and innocent and completely at odds with the erotic way she rubbed herself against his groin. He could feel the tightly woven cords of control unravelling at breakneck speed.

"I want you, Severus. More than I've ever wanted anything before." Her hands slipped lower to pull his hips tight against her. "Don't you want me?"

The last thread of rational thought snapped. He crushed her body against his, wrapping his arms around her and seizing the lips that had tormented him. Tongues collided, greedy and frantic. Somehow, he managed to manoeuvre them inside her flat. His boot found the bottom of the door, and he kicked it shut. The noise reverberated through the small room. He barely heard it.

Random articles of clothes were discarded as they haltingly made their way to her bed. She pulled her mouth from his, whispering words that held no meaning to him but caused her dress to cascade down her skin like ripples in a stream. She crawled onto the mattress, clad only in black knickers, stockings, and one high-heeled shoe, which she belatedly noticed and kicked away. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

The need to touch and taste and *take* was overwhelming. But hiding in the corners, just beyond the desire to lose himself in her and forget the world, was something else...the need to worship, to please, to give. *To cherish*. The words she'd spoken to him so long ago replayed in his mind. He forced himself to breathe deeply and slow down.

Kneeling on the bed beside her, he cupped her face in his hand. His thumb brushed along her jaw, against skin so soft it might have been spun from silk.

He held her gaze and said, "The sonnets of a thousand poets could not capture how enchanting you look right now."

She made a small noise...the quietest of gasps...and blinked several times. The smile that lit her face wrapped around him, until his chest tightened and he found it hard to breathe. Her fingers circled his wrist. She turned her face into his hand and pressed her lips to his palm. Tenderness had never before struck him as arousing, yet her gentle kiss was almost his undoing.

He pulled her face closer and trailed his lips along her forehead, over her eyelids, and down her pert little nose. With great care, he lowered her to the bed and turned his attention to her perfect breasts, rubbing his lips across one nipple until it hardened into a pink pebble. The tightened bud beckoned to him, so he drew it into the warmth of his mouth, swirling his tongue around it until she gasped again...much louder this time.

His hands explored, brushing along her ribs, into the dip of her waist, and down to her hips, where his fingers flexed and squeezed, as if he could brand his possession into her soft flesh. She came alive beneath him, trembling at his touch, quick breaths punctuated by frantic gasps. His mouth claimed her other breast while his fingertips traced the waistband of her knickers. Her body stilled when he slipped his fingers behind the thin silk. A low moan rushed from her lips. The sound was all the encouragement he needed to coax her need, slowly at first, then steadily faster until the feel of slick skin around his fingers threatened to drive him mad. His teeth scraped lightly along her breast as he raised his head. He had to see her, had to watch her face as he touched her in all the places he'd dreamt of.

Her hands clutched the bed covering, grabbing fistfuls of fabric until her knuckles turned white. The movements of her body were intoxicating as she danced beneath him, lifting her hips to meet each stroke, eager and demanding. Her eyes were closed, but her face shone. The sight of her spread out before him, body flushed with desire...for him...burned itself into his memory. She had no concept of the power she held, her ability to push his control beyond its limits. He was dangerously close to spilling himself all over her sexy black lingerie when he slid one long finger inside her, deep and slow. The sound that tore from her throat, something between a growl and a scream, only added to his sense of urgency. He slid his finger out and added another, burying them into her while his thumb moved higher to tease her clit. Her body bucked beneath him. He felt her tightening around his fingers, and he stroked her inside, prolonging her orgasm and extending his torture.

"Severus," she whispered hoarsely, eyes unfocused, lips swollen.

He would have liked to give her time to enjoy the moment, but it was no longer possible. He pushed his hand lower, intending to draw down her knickers as he went. The sound of fabric tearing echoed through the room, mingling with his strangled curses. The thought of finesse...the thought of anything but plunging his cock inside her...was completely gone. There'd be time for skill and tenderness later. Right now, he needed to fuck the hot, wet depth he'd just explored before his brain exploded inside his head.

He grabbed her behind her knees and yanked her legs apart...

Damn it ... too rough!

...then pulled her closer, driving into her, barely registering the sound of her screaming his name over and over. Her hands left the mass of tangled bedding. Perfectly manicured fingernails raked across his nipples and down his chest. He gripped her hips tight, pulling her against him hard and then holding her completely still while her body yielded and finally accepted all of him, his shaft buried deep inside her. He pulled out slowly, and her moan of protest turned to pleasure when he plunged back inside, just as deep but a tad less slow. He kept repeating the move until the tempo built to a steady, pounding rhythm. She met him thrust for frantic thrust, rocking her hips up each time he shoved down. As tight as she was, he could still feel the exact moment when her muscles contracted around him. The memory of how she had looked earlier, sprayed out before him as she had climaxed, was enough to push him over the edge. With one final thrust, he emptied himself inside her even as she shuddered beneath him.

When his body ceased convulsing, he collapsed onto the bed next to her. He pulled her into his arms and smoothed the wild mass of hair that had returned to its natural, unruly state from her continual squirming. She curled into his side and stretched her arm across his chest. After a few moments of toying with his chest hair, she traced invisible circles around his nipple with her fingernail.

"I like the way you smell," she said. She nuzzled against his skin and inhaled deeply.

"If I had a Sickle for every time I heard *that* after sex, I'd...ouch!" he exclaimed as she pinched him in a place no one had any right to pinch a man.

She shifted in his arms and wriggled a bit, then reached beneath her hip to extract a shredded scrap of black fabric.

"That's the second pair you destroyed. What do have against my knickers, anyway?" she asked, waving the material before his face.

He snatched them away and hooked one finger in the remaining leg-hole. Stretching the opposite side with his other hand, he shot the garment across the room like a rubber band. It sailed through the air and landed over a framed photograph of Hermione, Harry, and Ron from second-year at Hogwarts.

"See? They're still quite useful," he informed her.

"You are *such* a man," she chastised. "One minute, it's 'the sonnets of a thousand poets...', and then you get laid, and suddenly you're finding new and unusual ways to torment me."

"You would prefer I employ the old and ordinary methods of torment instead?"

"No!" She laughed as she flopped onto her back. "I'd prefer you continue the nice guy charade for ten whole minutes of post-coital repose."

"*Ten*?" He pretended offence. He turned on his side and propped his head upon his hand so he could gaze down at her.

"Less than ten if I happen to fall asleep first," she amended.

"My dear girl, what makes you think I'll allow you any sleep tonight?" His free hand grazed her stomach. He spread his fingers across her midriff, then dragged his hand higher, cupping her breast and marvelling at how delicate her skin was. It occurred to him that a man could spend countless hours like this without ever tiring of the feel of her skin, the wonder of watching her tremble with every touch. Was it possible to spend months...years, even...and still feel this way?

"Oh," was all she appeared capable of saying as his fingertips danced around her nipple.

"I believe there was a request made earlier," he began, drawing her gaze, "for something nice to remember me by?" She seemed to be having a hard time concentrating, so he ceased his ministrations.

Focusing on his face, she blinked and said, "Yes, but 'nice' is a bit of an understatement for what we just did. In fact, I don't think I have the words to describe how amazing that was."

"And considering your excellent vocabulary, that's saying quite a bit," he agreed. "But we can do better."

"Oh," she said again. "I wasn't exactly complaining."

"Surely you've noticed I'm a bit of a perfectionist, Miss Granger?"

"Oh, dear," she said and shook her head. "I'm one, as well. I'm afraid we could be here all night, Professor."

"Then we'd better get to work." He dipped his head and claimed her mouth.

The next several hours passed unnoticed. He spent the time studying every facet of her body, every nuance of her movements, never failing to be amazed by each new discovery. When he finally forced himself to stop touching her, exhaustion claimed her, and she fell asleep instantly. Dawn had begun to colour the horizon, and although he had spent an hour beside her, listening to her rhythmic breathing, sleep eluded him.

His mind raced. He couldn't shake the feeling that being here with her felt somehow... right. He tried to contemplate a return to his former life. The work he did for Kingsley was satisfying, and there had never been a shortage of witches willing to warm the bed of a war-hero. It had been a good life...he'd been content for the first time in many, many years. Yet the thought of going back to that now felt hollow. Tedious. How the hell was he supposed to forget her after tonight?

Sliding out of bed, he searched for his clothes and donned his dress robes. He Summoned the ruined knickers from across the room and snarled at the photograph when twelve-year-old Harry and Ron waved back at him. A swishing motion from his wand Transfigured the scraps of material into a single, perfect white rose, which he placed on the pillow beside her head. He kissed her temple and watched her sleep far longer than he should have. She never once stirred.

With a renewed sense of purpose, he left her flat and filled his lungs with crisp morning air. The streets outside were deserted at this early hour, and he welcomed the solitude. He needed a clear head for the decisions that loomed before him. But first, he had to find a shop...and not just any shop would do. He had a very important purchase to make.

A/N: My deepest thanks to Karelia for assuring me I didn't squick her with this chapter.

Get Back!

Chapter 18 of 20

Hermione has a Monday.

Chapter 18: Get Back!

Midway through Monday morning, Hermione was wishing she'd broken her perfect attendance record and skived off work. Having stayed up so late after the ball on Saturday, she'd slept straight through to Sunday afternoon and still felt a bit disorientated. And sore. She thumbed through her house-elf liberation plan, intending to give it one final review before sending it to Lucius. It failed to hold her attention. She'd been staring at the same page, unseeingly, for the past hour. Her mind kept drifting back to Saturday night. The vision of passion-filled, black eyes interrupted her constantly, chasing away all other thoughts. She sighed wearily, knowing it was pointless to allow such distractions.

It had been an incredible night, but that's all it would ever be—one amazing night. Severus had made no attempt to contact her, and she hadn't expected him to. She couldn't fault him—after all, she had been the one to suggest they spend the night together, without obligation for anything further. She had no reason to believe he would change his mind. Of course, that hadn't stopped her from listening for a knock on her door or straining her ears for the faint tapping of an owl at the window. But it was utter folly, and it had to stop.

No more! she told herself.

Her self steadfastly ignored her when the door to the DRCMC offices opened. She looked up hopefully, longing to see a dark frame filling the door. Instead, an enormous vase of flowers entered, followed closely by a tiny wizard who navigated the rows of half-cubicles, looking a bit like a giant rat in a maze. She returned her attention to her desk, knowing the flowers weren't for her.

"Hermione Granger?"

She turned to find the small wizard in her cubicle. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Delivery for you," he said in a bored voice. His wand sent the flowers to her desk, along with a small box wrapped in silver paper. He pushed a clipboard at her, and she dutifully signed her name where he'd indicated.

After he'd left, she plucked an ornate card from the flowers—a magnificent assortment of red and gold roses—and opened it with curiosity. The enchanted paper played Pachelbel's Canon while she read the elegant handwriting.

Dear Miss Granger,

Thank you for your delightful company at the Ministry ball, and for allowing me to manipulate your time on the dance floor. I look forward to our combined efforts in fostering a new form of unity within our society. If you are available on Tuesday next, I will be at the Ministry on other business and could accommodate a meeting at three o'clock to discuss the merits of your plan. (Merlin help me...)

With all sincerity,

Lucius Malfoy

She smiled at the flowers and pushed away the disappointment of them having come from the wrong man.

"Who sent you flowers?" asked a voice behind her.

She swivelled her chair and gazed at Lavender Brown.

"They're from a business associate," she explained. There had been times in the past when she'd almost felt sorry for Lavender and her questionable taste in men. Lavender had certainly attended the Ministry ball, and she had to have seen Ron and his new ... friend. With a sense of goodwill—and a sudden sympathy for unrequited feelings—she chose to ignore the way Lavender snorted at her reply.

"Please, Hermione," she said. "What sort of business associates would *you* have?"

"That's confidential." She felt the attempt at reconciliation sliding from her grasp.

"They're from Professor Snape, aren't they? Come on, you can tell me," she wheedled. "You know I'll find out eventually, anyway."

"No, Lavender, the flowers are not from Severus." Regret over the admission coloured her words with more anger than she'd intended.

"Oh, it's *Severus* now, is it? I didn't realise you knew him so ... *intimately*."

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't stop the heat from creeping into her cheeks at the memory of just how intimately she now knew their former Potions master.

Lavender continued to smirk, then noticed the small package beside the flowers. "What's in the box?" she asked.

Hermione shrugged, half dreading the discovery of its contents. She had no idea what Lucius might have sent her, but she knew Lavender would find a way to mock it. She snatched the box from her desk, before Lavender tried to open it for her. It was surprisingly light—almost as if it were empty—and thin, about the size of a Muggle music disc. An emerald-green bow adorned the top, and a tiny envelope peeked out from beneath. She opened the card and read:

H—

I'll explain later...

—S

"It's from Severus," she whispered, too stunned to realise she shouldn't have spoken aloud.

"It's jewellery!" Lavender said and clapped her hands together. "That box is the perfect size for a necklace. Open it!" Her eyes shone with anticipation.

Hermione would later blame her decision on a lack of sleep and the extremely contagious nature of Lavender's excitement. If she'd stopped to consider the wisdom of opening a gift from Severus in front of the Ministry's biggest gossip, she would have certainly thought twice.

But she, too, was bursting to see what he had sent, so she ripped apart the pretty silver paper and opened the lid. Inside the box, tucked beneath a delicate sheet of tissue, sat four exquisite pairs of lacy silk knickers—two in sapphire blue, two in black.

Time seemed to move in slow-motion as she lunged forward with the lid, frantic to cover the gift before Lavender could see. But it was too late. The wretched girl snaked her hand into the folds of paper and withdrew a blue pair, waving it over her head and quickly dancing out of Hermione's reach.

"Look, everyone!" She laughed as she skipped through the office. "Look at Hermione's special delivery!"

Hermione raced after her. She fought the urge to rip the material from Lavender's hand. The thin fabric would be torn to shreds if she wasn't careful—a lesson she had learnt twice, thanks to Severus. She didn't care to risk the destruction of something so lovely simply to spare her own embarrassment. It was probably too late for that, anyway. She reached out her hand and gently pulled at the knickers.

"Let go, Lavender," she ordered.

"Make me," she taunted, tugging until the poor garment was stretched taut.

Opting to save the fabric, Hermione released her end. But Lavender seemed to have the same thought, albeit a fraction of a second later. The knickers went sailing through the air at a remarkable velocity—and smacked soundly onto the face of a wizard who had just entered the office. It was eerily similar to the day she'd sent the giant puffball mushroom at Severus, several weeks ago. Except this time, it was her knickers rather than fungus. And instead of landing on Severus, who might have found it humorous, the lingerie was slowly pulled from the face of Kingsley Shacklebolt, who clearly wasn't amused.

"My office, Hermione. Now," he barked before turning his back and marching away.

Bugger. She definitely should have stayed home today.

A/N: Hugs to Karelia for her beta work on this story! I loved reading the reviews for the last chapter and the guesses on what sort of shop Severus was looking for, and what sort of purchase he intended to make. It's nice to see so many romantic hearts out there!!

With A Little Help From My Friends

Chapter 19 of 20

Kingsley gets official. Lavender gets a surprise.

Chapter 19: With a Little Help From My Friends

Hermione shot a hateful glance in Lavender's direction, then hurried through the door to follow Kingsley. He was just settling himself behind his massive wooden desk when she arrived in his office.

"Please be seated," he said and indicated a chair.

"Thanks, Royal." She used his nickname from the days leading up to the war in a shameless attempt to remind him how much he liked her. They had bonded during their Thestral ride from Privet Drive, when the Order had spirited Harry to the Burrow, and had remained close throughout the subsequent years. Kingsley had personally created the position of House-Elf Liaison after the war, so she owed her job at the Ministry to him.

"I have fabulous news for you," she said. "I think we're about to see some real changes in the rights of house-elves."

"I didn't call you in here to talk about house-elves."

"Right." She pretended to pout, although she could hardly fault his response. Ever the optimist, she had been telling him more or less the same thing for the past three years, despite a notable lack of progress.

"I had something specific in mind when I came to your office ... a rather delicate matter to discuss. But I think we should talk about these, instead." He held up her knickers, then twirled them from the ends of his dark fingers.

She was determined to hide her embarrassment. "Absolutely. Why bother with performance deliverables when we can chat about underwear?"

"Precisely." The twirling stopped, and he dangled the soft blue fabric from his index finger. "I'm not entirely certain what I should think about this, Hermione. I'd like to hear your opinion, before we proceed."

"My opinion on the knickers? Well, I think they're lovely, of course, although they might be a tad small for you. And blue really isn't your best colour, but I imagine you knew that already."

"Ha-ha," he said without smiling.

"I'm sorry, Kingsley," she apologised in earnest. Then she shrugged and said, "Just a bit of mischief, I'm afraid. Everyone's still rather giddy after the ball." She considered telling him about Lavender and her antics, but it was hardly the type of problem one pestered the Minister with.

"I'm glad you mentioned the ball...it's exactly what I wanted to discuss with you." He tossed the knickers into his desk drawer.

"Um ... May I have those back?"

"No."

"Please?" she asked, but he seemed unmoved and ignored her outstretched hand.

"I saw you on Saturday night, Hermione," he said. "Your entrance, as well as how quickly you and Severus departed."

Damn it, she thought as her cheeks flamed to life once more. Why couldn't she stop blushing whenever someone mentioned the night she had spent with Severus?

"What exactly is the nature of your relationship?" he asked without preamble and pinned her with his stare.

She was taken aback. In all the time she'd known Kingsley, he had never asked something so personal. She gathered her courage and replied, "I'm sorry, but that's really none of your business."

"I'm officially making it my business."

She sighed and spread her hands. "Just because you're the Minister of Magic doesn't mean you can shove the word 'official' in front of something and make it ... official!"

He scowled at her, but she merely folded her arms across her chest. His expression softened. "Look, I realise the past year hasn't been easy for you. I appreciate how hard you've worked, despite all the struggles you've had with the house-elves."

"Yes, but I truly have made progress there..." she interrupted.

He didn't seem to care and interrupted her right back, drowning her words with his booming voice. "And I understand you went through a rough patch with the papers. Although, after Saturday night, you must realise how wise you were to separate yourself from Ron." He shuddered.

"Um... thanks?" She smiled and relaxed into her chair. She'd always been lucky to have Kingsley's support. He'd been like a father to her, offering vital advice when her parents were helpless to understand some subtlety of the wizarding world.

He laced his fingers together and placed them on his desk. His stare was intense, never once wavering as he slowly leant forward. "If I find out you're playing Severus for a fool...stringing him along, seeing someone else, or not being completely honest with him...you'll be out of here so fast your head will spin."

The caring, fatherly image shattered into a thousand pieces. She gaped at him, for once too stunned to point out the many codes of conduct and Ministry laws he had just broken.

"Do I make myself clear?" he asked.

"Kingsley, I never..." she began, but he held up his hand to quiet her.

"I don't need the details," he said. "I'm not accusing you of anything...I'm just issuing a warning. I know you're smart enough to realise I'm not joking. Severus deserves some happiness, and short of that, he deserves to be spared any more pain."

"Please believe me, Kingsley. I care about Severus ... I care a great deal. More than I should, perhaps. And I would never act in a way that would knowingly cause him pain." She slapped her palm against his desk to underscore her statement. "Never!"

He watched her in silence for a very long time. She had observed his tactics before and forced herself to remain quiet. Kingsley's stare could coerce a confession from the most hardened of criminals, but she had already admitted the truth by owning up to her feelings. After a few more moments of careful scrutiny, he seemed satisfied and gave her a curt nod.

"Good. Get back to work, then," he said and turned his attention to a complex instrument on his desk.

She left his office and roamed the halls in a state of bemusement. Had the Minister of Magic really just threatened to fire her if she didn't treat Severus well? It was a meaningless threat, considering she'd never do the things he had mentioned. And on some level, she supposed it was nice that Severus had such an ardent supporter. He had certainly drawn the short stick in father figures up to this point. It was good to know Kingsley looked out for him.

Returning to her desk, she flopped into her chair and savoured the solitude, knowing it would end when her colleagues returned from lunch. Her eyes were drawn to the vase of roses, but it was the innocent-looking box of lingerie that occupied her thoughts. She retrieved the card and chuckled at the brief message.

I'll explain later.

She didn't think she really needed an explanation, but that hardly mattered. It was the word 'later' that lifted her spirits. The promise of seeing him again brought a ridiculous smile to her face. It lingered on her lips and refused to leave, despite the return of her co-workers and their furtive glances. Even the inevitable reappearance of Lavender couldn't diminish it entirely. Until she opened her mouth, at least.

"I see you're still employed," said Lavender. "What a pity."

"I see you're still a jealous bitch."

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermione. Why would I be jealous of you?"

"That's an excellent question, Lavender, and one that surely deserves your immediate attention. Why don't you go back to your office and rethink your life for a bit?"

Lavender's smile was pure saccharine. "You know, I'm actually glad you work here...after all, you're a great source of amusement. It's such fun to guess what important figure you'll throw yourself at next. Whatever would I do without you?"

"For a start, you could grow up. Then perhaps you could learn how to treat others with respect and kindness."

It was obviously not going to happen anytime soon. Lavender pointed to the box on the desk and said, "No wonder you did so well at Hogwarts."

"You've had four hours to work on this, Lavender," she replied, rolling her eyes. "Surely, you could have found a better insult by now?"

Lavender's gaze darted around the room as several soft snickers came from various cubicles. She projected her voice and said, "Everyone always thought you were so smart, but it turns out you were just sleeping with your teachers."

Hermione sighed. "Would you give it up, already?"

"I can't ... I'm far too curious. Was it just Snape, or were you fucking all of them? Was that the real reason McGonagall always liked you so much?"

An angry response sprang to her lips, but before she could voice it, a deep voice interrupted them.

"That's quite enough, Miss Brown," said Severus as he stepped into the small cubicle. The disdain in his voice was chilling. His appearance seemed to have opposite effects on the two women: while Lavender paled considerably and looked somewhat ill, Hermione's face turned pink with heat, and her lips lifted in a shy smile.

The man had impeccable timing.

Karelia provided super-fast beta skills to this story, and I'm eternally grateful. Only one chapter left! Thanks to everyone for leaving reviews - I've so enjoyed reading your comments!

I Want To Hold Your Hand

Chapter 20 of 20

There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be—it's easy. All you need is love ... Love is all you need.

Chapter 20: I Want to Hold Your Hand

It was just like returning to the Potions classroom, to the cold Hogwarts dungeons. Severus squared his shoulders and folded his arms across his chest. He stared down his angular nose and surveyed Lavender as if he'd rarely witnessed anything so vile. Hermione recognised the posture and knew a lecture was coming. She was just glad she wasn't the recipient.

"Miss Granger may have the grace to ignore your insults, but I have no such compunction," he told Lavender.

"Yes, sir," she replied meekly.

"I happen to care deeply about this woman, Miss Brown. When you insult Miss Granger, you insult *me*."

The tenacious smile returned to Hermione's face. It was a bizarre way to find out he had feelings for her, but she wasn't about to disparage the delivery when the message was so welcome.

"I understand, Professor," said Lavender.

"I am sorry for you, Miss Brown," he said with a snarl. "You've obviously failed to secure the affections of another, so you've resorted to the fabrication of malicious lies. I find this behaviour inexcusable. I don't know whether you're jealous, bitter, or just being intentionally cruel. Frankly, I don't care. Belittling others to improve your flailing self-worth is a pathetic strategy, and it will not be tolerated."

Hermione wanted very badly to applaud his speech, but the look on Lavender's face stopped her. Judging from the trembling of her lower lip, they had about ten seconds before the tears started.

"I'm very sorry." She looked suitably miserable.

"And to whom should you direct your apology, Miss Brown?"

Lavender turned, and her eyes filled. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

Hermione inclined her head. Lavender looked at Severus once more, then backed out of the cubicle and fled the offices, leaving a trail of excited whispers in her wake.

"Not that that wasn't fun to watch," Hermione began, "but I'm a big girl, Severus. I can fight my own battles."

"Of course you can," he said with a careless shrug. "But I doubt you derive as much pleasure from it as I do."

"I'm sure you're right."

Jerking his head towards the office door, he asked, "Might I have a word with you in private?"

She nodded and led them into the hallway. They strolled along the corridors in silence until they found a quiet spot, in an alcove behind the lifts.

He reached into his robes and retrieved a swatch of blue fabric. "Guess where I found these?" He dangled the lingerie before her and appeared quite serious as he awaited her answer.

Unfortunately for him, her mood had lifted considerably at his unexpected appearance.

"If I had a Sickle for every time my knickers ended up in the Minister's desk ..." she began but stopped when his expression turned murderous.

"Madam, you had best explain why Kingsley was in possession of your knickers."

"It's a long story."

"Find a way to condense it."

"Actually, it's more humorous if you hear the whole thing."

"You expect me to believe this sordid tale has a punch-line?"

He continued to wave her knickers about, punctuating his statements by shaking them at her. She made a grab for them and found herself in yet another tug-o-war.

"Careful," she said in warning. "Need I remind you how easily these tear?"

He tugged hard. She waited for the sound of ripping fabric, but all was silent. "Not these," he said with a smug grin. "They've been charmed to resist quite a bit of..." he stopped to clear his throat, then finished, "... force."

"Is that so?" Her grin spread as she pulled the knickers and stepped closer. When their bodies were very nearly touching, she said, "That's a handy little bit of magic." She slid her tongue across her lips to moisten them.

He seemed to study the move with intense concentration, black eyes narrowed while he stared at her mouth. His jaw flexed over clenched teeth.

"Perhaps we should conduct a test to see how well they work," she offered.

"Perhaps you should explain why they were in the Minister's desk."

She stepped back and shook her head. "You're rather obsessed with this, aren't you? I'd think you were jealous of Kingsley, if the idea wasn't so laughable."

"Do I look amused?"

"You must be, though," she argued. "He's old enough to be my father."

Pursing his lips together, he stared at her pointedly as one eyebrow travelled high onto his forehead.

She held up her hands in supplication. "Right, that's probably not the best argument I could have made."

"Oh, really?" Before she could defend herself, he said, "Try to imagine my surprise, Hermione, upon being handed your knickers and having to endure a twenty-minute lecture on the consequences of breaking your heart."

Her chest tightened. She was touched to learn Kingsley had given Severus a similar warning to the one he'd bestowed on her earlier.

"Stop smiling," he commanded. "I don't relish having to tell the Minister of Magic about my intention to court you, and I certainly don't enjoy him handling your undergarments."

He stood staring down at her, waiting for her response, but for once, she was completely speechless. She took a moment to ponder the absurdity of their timing. Just when she'd accepted she'd never hear the words 'mutually exclusive' from him, he brings up courtship.

"Well?" he prompted. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"You wish to court me?" she asked.

There appeared the slightest of smirks on his face, softening his features. "We were speaking of your knickers," he reminded her. "And what on earth do you find so funny about this?"

She hadn't meant to start laughing, but she couldn't help herself. "*Courting*. It just feels so ... formal. We've already shagged each other senseless. Isn't it a bit late for the courting phase?"

"Nonsense." He dismissed her protests with a wave of his hand. "Since we're going to do this, we had best do it the right way."

"I didn't think there was anything wrong with the way we did it on Saturday." She approached him again, and this time, his arms came around her instantly, pulling her in tight.

"I'm surprised at you, Miss Granger," he said quietly. His smirk turned into a smile better suited to the bedroom. "I would have thought someone with your voracity for knowledge would be eager to see if the method could be improved upon."

"Hmm. You're absolutely right, Professor," she agreed. "Further study is most definitely in order."

His fingers cupped her chin and pulled it closer, until his lips found hers. The kiss was over too quickly, but it held the promise of more.

"I believe our extracurricular activities will require sustenance. Eight o'clock for dinner tonight?" he asked.

"Lovely."

His head dipped lower for another brief kiss. He placed his hand against her cheek and stared at her, his brows drawing together. His smile grew distant...almost nostalgic...as he rubbed his thumb along her jaw.

"From the first moment I saw you, I knew you were going to be trouble."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." A nervous laugh escaped her lips. "Are you sure about this, Severus? About us? In an exclusive relationship ... with each other?"

"I'm certain the thought of you in an exclusive relationship with anyone else is intolerable."

"To me, as well."

"And I'm confident we'll never grow bored with each other. You have an uncanny knack for keeping me on my toes."

"Wait until you hear my plans for keeping you on your back..."

"Naughty girl," he chastised and gave her bottom a playful swat. Then he circled her waist again and grew serious. "Are you sure about this?"

"Of course."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Why?"

"Why am I sure?"

"No ... *Why me?*"

"Seriously?"

His sigh was impatient. "Yes, seriously. Why did you choose me when you could have had any man you desired?"

She smiled. "Because you're quite endearing when you say things like that. Completely mistaken, of course, but endearing nonetheless."

"That's hardly an enlightening answer. Come now ... give me one good reason."

"Because you taught me how to fly."

"You taught yourself how to fly...I merely provided a catalyst."

She shrugged and filed the comment away for later debate. "Because you read the newspaper while you Apparate."

"Now you're being flippant."

"Because you gift me with indestructible undergarments."

The smirk returned to his face. "Tell me, Miss Granger, are you striving for extra credit by providing three reasons, when I requested but one?"

"Old habits die hard, Professor," she said. "Is extra credit available?"

"Potentially..."

"Well then," she said as she moved her lips closer, "after dinner, I'll show you all my other reasons."

"I look forward to that," he whispered before his lips closed the gap.

Contentment settled over her, as if she was whole for the first time, as if she had only been waiting for this moment to arise. She thought about the cruel prank that had led to their chance encounter, and wondered if they ought to have thanked Lavender, after all. No point rewarding bad behaviour, though, especially when living well was the best revenge. Smiling against his lips, she contemplated the future and lost herself in his kiss.

A/N: It was a long and winding road, but they finally made it! If you read the original prompt this story was written to, you'll realise what an odd path I took to fulfill the gift recipient's request of Severus realising he's free to court Hermione. Strange where the muse will wander when I allow it. :-~) Many thanks to Karelia, my AMAZING beta, for super-fast turnaround and invaluable support, encouragement, and love. Yay! My first completed, multi-chaptered story! Thanks so much for reading and leaving reviews. I loved the feedback!!