

Gravity

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When Hermione returns from a conference, she has to realise that some things have changed at Hogwarts during her absence...

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's note: Uncounted hugs and squishes to Annie, Fer, and Jadey for alpha- or beta-reading this story in its different stages. Thank you so much, ladies :o)

Her footsteps echoed through the empty castle, composing an angry symphony as she ran down the stairs from the headmistress' office, travelling coat billowing behind her. But Hermione wasn't angry. What she felt was beyond anger.

Fury, plain and pure, lurched in her stomach as she reached the Entrance Hall and the sight of the empty Gryffindor hourglass greeted her once again; close by, hundreds of Slytherin emeralds twinkled, mocking her in the candlelight. For a moment, she stopped, clenching her hands tightly.

When she had returned from the Arithmancy conference an hour earlier, she had been shocked to find her House robbed of the fruits of a whole term. And to make it worse, Minerva had not only informed her just minutes ago that each and every point had been deducted by a certain Potions master, but for mediocre reasons like running in the Great Hall, for Merlin's sake. Oh, how she wished to hex that pompous, bigheaded Slytherin right on spot. Three hundred and seventy-seven bloody points...in a single week!

With a sad gleam in her eyes, the headmistress had claimed to be at a loss for what could have possibly upset Severus Snape. Sincerely, she had assured Hermione, the points would be restored in the morning as Minerva had only awaited the younger witch's return; however, this did little to calm Hermione's raging disappointment in Severus.

The man had promised he would look after her House while she was away, and what had he done instead? He had taken his foul mood out on her cubs.

The school clock struck midnight as Hermione set out for the dungeons, but she didn't even spare it a glance. She felt drained; the conference had been long and tiring, as had been the journey back from Bulgaria, but she wanted...needed...an explanation, and she had no intention of waiting until the morning. Either way, she wouldn't be able to get an hour of sleep tonight.

Once she reached Severus' private quarters, she gave the door an insistent knock. Arms crossed in front of her chest, she waited for him to respond, her right foot tapping impatiently on the cold stone floor. The dim light that shone from beneath the wood betrayed the fact that he was still awake.

A minute passed, then another. She had just lifted her hand to knock again when the ancient wood creaked and the door revealed the scowling face of Severus Snape.

For a brief moment, all anger and disappointment dissolved into thin air, and worry tightened her chest as Hermione beheld the man in front of her. Dark smudges wrapped his eyes, his whole being exuding a feeling of exhaustion.

However, his greeting washed every feeling of concern away.

"Hermione, what an unpleasant surprise. I see you have finally returned to grace these halls with your presence again."

"We need to talk, Severus." Without waiting for an invitation, she crossed his doorstep and rushed inside.

"If you say so," he sneered, closing the door behind her.

For an absurd second, Hermione believed she had heard a waver of nervousness in his cold voice, but she brushed the thought away and focussed on the tall man standing in the middle of the room.

From his appearance, it was easy to tell that she had interrupted him during a late-night brewing session. His lank and once again greasy hair was tied behind his neck, and he wore his usual brewing coat. The black leather gloves that covered his hands indicated that he was still in the early stage of preparing his ingredients.

She gave him a steely glance, smoothing a tedious curl out of her face. "Yes, we do."

"I see." He frowned, already striding towards the entrance to his private lab, waving dismissively in her direction. "Nevertheless, I have to ask you to spare me from this discussion until tomorrow. As you can possibly tell, I am brewing."

"Then your potion has to wait, Severus, because I won't."

Meeting her eyes, he sighed, irritated. "Hermione..."

"Don't 'Hermione' me." With two strides she was in front of him, poking one finger against his chest. "You know bloody well why I am here, Severus. You had no right to behave this way. You promised me you would look after my students, and looking after Gryffindor House doesn't include deducting House points and assigning detentions for every breath they drew."

Immediately, she felt him stiffening at her words, yet he remained silent in the face of her accusation, his eyes boring unfathomably into hers. Hermione sighed, defeated, lowering her gaze.

"I have no idea why you behaved as you did, Severus, and to be honest, I don't even care why. I am merely disappointed."

A cheerless laugh echoed through the room. "Oh, I shall be delighted to share the reason for my *objectionable* behaviour with you, my dear."

The icy note in his voice curled around her heart like a poisonous snake. Not even aware that she had taken a step back, Hermione tried to meet his gaze, but Severus' eyes lingered on his leather gloves while he removed them unsettlingly slowly.

"It seems," he drawled, "that you are not the only person in this room who feels some sort of disappointment tonight." Upon the last word, his eyes snapped up, catching hers, hard, cold, like a predator assessing his victim's reaction.

"Severus, I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Well, that much is obvious," he sneered. "And here I was assuming that *this* would be the reason for your visit. How unfortunate for you, my dear, that they don't sell the *Daily Prophet* in Bulgaria. So, ironic as it may be, it seems to be my place to enlighten you. *Accio Daily Prophet*."

With a swift movement, he Summoned the newspaper from his desk and handed her the Tuesday edition. His features contorted with an expression of disgust... or was it anguish? It was impossible to tell.

Confused, Hermione blinked before she looked down at the paper in her hands. The moment her eyes fell on the headline, her heart lost its rhythm.

PROPHET EXCLUSIVE: LOVERS REUNITED!

War Heroine Meets Quidditch Star Secretly in Romantic Bulgarian Restaurant.

By Chief Staff Reporter Rita Skeeter

"This is preposterous! Utterly preposterous!" A trembling hand flew to her mouth.

She and Viktor hadn't seen each other in over a decade. Therefore, her conference in Sofia had been a perfect opportunity to refresh their friendship and meet for dinner. Meriin, she would pluck each of Rita's little beetle wings for this tomorrow...very slowly.

However, all that mattered to her heart at this very moment was the man next to her, her colleague, her friend, her... Hermione swallowed, her gaze searching for Severus'. He stood a few steps away, observing her with unforgiving eyes.

"You certainly don't believe something Skeeter wrote, do you, Severus? Viktor and I are old friends." *Please. Please, say you don't.*

"No, certainly I do not," he snapped, "but I do believe what I see, Hermione, and this..." A disgusted finger pointed at the newspaper in her hands. "...doesn't look like old friends. Not in the least. I thought we...well, never mind." Claspings his hands behind his back, he began to pace the room with long strides.

Until now, Hermione had only read as far as the headline, but now that her eyes found the picture accompanying the article, awareness ran like ghost-like fingers down her spine.

In the picture, a black-and-white version of Viktor sat next to her at a small table, his large hand brushing her cheek gently. Over and over again. A moment mercilessly captured in time. And yet, this moment had never happened in her world. There had to be an illusion, a spell that altered the photo.

However, with each futile revealing spell she tried silently on the parchment, desperation rose higher in her throat, yet the picture remained unchanged. Only when she wiped absently at a silent tear that trailed down her cheek did she understand.

Tears. It had been tears Viktor had brushed away in that moment: silent tears spilling freely down her cheek. However, they were hardly to be seen in a picture taken from afar.

Viktor...like many others before...had wanted her personal account of the end of war, and she had granted him his wish. Later, she had blamed it on the Bulgarian wine that her usual resolve had cracked. She had needed three attempts and Viktor's soothing hand to describe how she had seen Severus fall in the Shrieking Shack. The moment the light, the life, had left his eyes for those endless heartbeats and how she had gone back and forced the Bezoar down Severus' throat, hands covered in his blood. Meriin, there had been so much blood....

She swallowed, willing her mind to focus. Suddenly, it all made sense...oh, it made so painfully perfect sense now. Severus' foul mood during the last week. The waver in his voice. The reluctance to talk to her. He had assumed she had come to tell him she was with Viktor.

You foolish, foolish man. Hermione shook her head, eyes fluttering closed.

They had been friends for years. *Real friends.* Ever since Minerva had made them representatives for the Order in the trial against Umbridge. The mud the toad-faced witch had tried to sling at Hogwarts and Albus Dumbledore in her defence had forced them together, creating a bond not unlike a troll had done in another case so many years ago...a bond that had only intensified after she had divorced Ron and returned to Hogwarts.

However, in the last months, Severus and she had more and more often balanced on the fine line that separated them from being lovers. Hermione had never truly tried to pinpoint the moment when the centre of gravity in their relationship had shifted. But somehow it had. Irrevocably.

Suddenly, eyes lingered too long, as did seemingly casual caresses...a touch, an embrace, and the good night kisses had long forgone chasteness.

Neither of them had ever referred to the incidents afterwards. It was a slow, silent dance of unspoken confessions... a dance she hadn't dared to end.

Having Severus Snape as a friend was a challenge, but acknowledging she was hopelessly in love with him was a disaster. A tremendous disaster, given the fact that even the new edition of *Hogwarts: A History* had chosen to dedicate a whole paragraph to the war-changing effect of his life-long love for Lily Potter.

Deep down, she had always feared that, in the end, she would come to realise that, while the centre of gravity in their relationship had shifted, the Severus' heart remained the same, circling around the memory of Lily for all eternity....

She had seen enough evidence to feed this fear. Year after year, she had stood by and watched when he had, in one way or another, driven any women away who had dared to approach him at those ridiculous Ministry celebrations. She knew once she revealed her feelings to him, he would pity her, would pity the foolish Gryffindor for losing her heart to another hopeless cause.

Hermione heaved a breath, fighting against painful tightness in her chest before she opened her eyes again. For a moment longer, her gaze lingered on the fateful picture before her eyes flew to Severus.

He was still pacing the room, unsettled. Hurt. She couldn't allow him to believe that she had betrayed whatever kind of affection he felt for her in his heart. She had to...needed to...tell him what she felt for him...only for him.

"Severus?" *Can't you see that I love you?*

The quiet, gentle sound of her voice made him stop in his tracks, his eyes still blazing with anger and disappointment as he turned to her.

"There is no excuse, Hermione; don't even try. I won't allow you to play me for a fool any longer."

There was no modicum of truth to his words; however, the accusation still felt like a knife to her heart. Cold. Unforgiving. And somewhere in a far corner of her mind, she wondered if at one time someone else had played games with his heart.

"I won't give any excuse, Severus, yet I would like you to do one thing before you condemn me."

An angry snort was the only answer she received. For endless moments, hope and fear wrestled in her chest while he scrutinised her with his gaze from the other side of the room. However, eventually, he crossed the distance between them, his frame towering over her.

"What do you want?"

"*Accio magnifier,*" she whispered, her eyes never leaving his as she caught the item.

Holding it out to him, she asked gently, "Would you please look at the picture once more and tell me what you see?"

"This is ludicrous. I refuse..."

"*Please?*" she asked again, insistently, while her hand holding the magnifier never wavered.

Moments passed before he took the item and lowered his gaze to look at the frontispiece. And the small tendril of hope in Hermione's chest flowered out when the harsh lines on his face relaxed visibly.

With an expression of plain astonishment in his eyes, he looked at her. "You were crying."

"I was."

"Why?"

"Because I recounted something for Viktor that hurt badly to remember."

A questioning, impatient eyebrow rose, and a small smile lightened her face in reply.

She placed her right hand flat against his chest, holding his gaze. Relief washed over her as he didn't flinch from her touch. For precious seconds, she simply enjoyed the rapid beating of his heart beneath her palm, the steady reminder that he was alive and well.

"I told him how I once, in a dirty, dusty shack, nearly lost the man I love."

She more felt than heard the sharp intake of breath that followed her words. Instinctively, she melted against his chest, hiding her face into the fabric of his coat to savour the distinct herbal scent inseparably connected with Severus, one that always reminded her of a forest after the rain.

Maybe for the last time, her fear reminded her.

"Hermione..."

"You can try Legilimency on me if you don't believe me," she murmured, stopping him mid-sentence. She wouldn't allow him to drive her away so easily. Not now that she had bared her heart to him.

Long, gentle fingers brushed her cheek. "Hermione, would you please look at me?"

She stiffened. It was such a calm, composed request, betraying nothing of his emotional state. However, the moment she raised her face to him, her every fear was proven wrong by the almost vulnerable expression in his night-dark gaze.

Tenderly, he cupped her face. "You love me?"

Yes, *oh, yes.* She knew the answer, had given it in her mind, her dreams over a hundred times, but suddenly had no words left, no sound formed on her tongue. All she managed was a brief, silent nod, yet it was all the man in front of her needed.

Dark eyes fluttered close while he exhaled a shuddering breath. "Foolish woman."

And then, his lips were on hers. Searing. Determined. And while the few kisses they had shared had given her vague glimpses of his desire, this one was nothing but a fierce promise.

Deepening their kiss, he buried one hand in her hair, just above the hollow of her neck. The other moved to the small of her back, pressing her frame closer to his chest while his tongue brushed over her mouth, teasing her, coaxing soft moans from her. And she succumbed freely to the feelings she had feared and reined in for so long.

After countless heartbeats, they broke apart, and he leaned his forehead against hers, his eyes still closed.

"I thought I had lost you," he whispered, his voice thick with unspoken emotion.

"I know." *Finally, I know.*

"I couldn't bear..."

Quickly, she placed an index finger against his lips. "Hush. You won't. Don't even think that."

She felt his breath hot on her skin as he drew another shaky breath, and when he finally met her eyes in silent understanding, her heart found the words to silence his every fear. "Make me yours, Severus. Take me to bed."

Her voice sounded foreign, husky, nothing more than a whisper, but she could see the black in his eyes melt into an endless sea of emotion. He brought her right hand up to his mouth, brushing his lips over her knuckles, tickling her skin. Hermione barely heard the soft whimper that escaped her throat at his touch.

"Come."

She swallowed, willing her feet to move. It was ridiculous. They knew each other, they were friends, and hardly absolute beginners at this, but suddenly, her mouth was dry and her knees weak with nervousness.

Slowly, he led her towards the bedroom, and Hermione revelled in the waves of desire that washed over her when, on the way, his lips found the sensitive skin of her pulse point: desire that was accompanied by something more. Something airy, teasing, insistent, that seemed to have broken free from the depths of her soul; something she had believed would never exist for her. A feeling like wing beats. *Butterfly wing beats.*

The moment they stepped into the dim light of his bedroom, he pulled her close again, burying his nose in her hair. For the first time, she recognised the slight trembling of his frame beneath her palms; but every remaining coherent thought dissolved as his mouth traced along her neckline, causing her to squirm in delight.

Intuitively, her hands smoothed down his clothed form, caressing the firm, delicious outlines of his butt; and it didn't take long until her fingers found the row of buttons of his brewing coat, this last line of defence that shielded his skin from her touch.

At her attempt to open the one on top, Severus stepped back abruptly, shaking his head and bringing them both face to face. She tried to object as he covered her hands with his and placed them securely on his chest, but the serious glow in his eyes rendered her silent. Uninvited, foreboding unfurled its merciless claws in her stomach. He hadn't returned her sentiment earlier and would probably tell her now that he never would.

His body, his mind, but not... his heart, her fear reminded her.

"Hermione, this isn't easy for me, but you must understand... I need you to know before we take this any further..." He trailed off, running a restless hand through his hair. "Damn, I am doing this all wrong." Without any forewarning, he cupped her face again, holding her captive with his gaze. "I want this, Hermione. I want you. Only you, do you understand me? I love you. It has taken me a damn long time to work up the courage to admit it, so long that I already believed I'd lost you. And I wouldn't forgive myself if you have any doubt about that while we make love."

For a moment, there was nothing but humming in her veins when the butterflies found her again and his words sank in.

Lighthearted, she inclined her head, arching an eyebrow. "Well, what are you waiting for, then?"

He chuckled. "Cheeky little witch. I should teach you some respect."

She laughed. "I would like to see you try."

With one swift movement, he lifted her into his arms, walking towards the bed. "Later, witch. For now, I have something different for you in mind."

"Oh, yes. Please." The words had left her mouth before she even knew it, and Hermione was thankful that her face was buried in the hollow of his neck, as the inevitable blush rose hot in her cheeks.

He crossed the room with a few strides and lowered her onto the sheets of his bed, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Have I ever told you that I find your Gryffindor bluntness quite endearing sometimes?"

"Only sometimes?" A playful pout curled her lips as he moved to lie next to her.

"Even sometimes," he growled before capturing her mouth again, and she drowned in the sensation of kissing, touching and feeling until she found herself moaning with frustration as her hands struggled with the buttons of his robe again.

Laughter rumbled in his chest as he propped himself up on his elbow, slanting his head to face her. Hermione shot him an indignant glare.

"You should be grateful, witch; the brewing coat has the fewest buttons of all my attire."

"Really?" she asked slyly before whispering a wandless spell. Within a second, every single button that had graced his robe vanished, leaving her with free access beneath different layers of Severus Snape.

"Granger, you will restore..." The rest of his demand was lost in a sharp intake of breath as her hands sneaked beneath his shirt, grazing his skin airily with her fingertips. Through her skin, she felt the shivers of pleasure that rushed through him at her mere touch. It was a heady, intoxicating experience, yet nothing compared to seeing this controlled man surrender to her ministrations.

Carefully, she freed him of his coat, of one shirt, then of another, until she had bared his naked torso to her gaze. Eagerly, like over an undiscovered land, her mouth travelled with feather-light kisses over the outlines of his chest, marking her dominion. The only accompaniment was his breathless gasps, each more ragged than the last.

However, the moment her tongue traced the sensitive skin above his waistband, she was toppled backwards onto the sheets, his hands pinning her to the mattress.

Her heart hammered wildly against her ribcage as she came face-to-face with the predatory grin of her soon-to-be lover, the dark onyx of his eyes glittering hungrily.

"Well, my love," he purred, his lips curving sinfully while his fingers worked easily on her blouse, "enough of your teasing for tonight. It's about time to find out what pleases *you*."

The mere declaration sent sweet shivers of desire and anticipation down her spine, but it was the unknown endearment that stirred something deep beneath her heart.

Opening the last button of her blouse, he slowly pulled the fabric off her shoulders. Dark, lank hair swung forward, tickling her skin as he lowered his mouth to her stomach, the back of his hand brushing her skin.

"Beautiful." Fingers, memorising the area around her belly button.

"Enticing." Lips, trailing along her collarbone.

"You." Kisses, nothing but kisses from the soft shell of her ear along her bare right shoulder.

For a fleeting moment, Hermione wished she could nudge him, could tell him what a closet romantic he had proven to be with this display, but his words, his mouth, his touch had reduced the core of her being to sweet shivers and moans. And she wanted, needed more of him.

"Severus." His name sounded like a plea while she arched beneath his hands.

"Yes, my love?" She could see his mouth twitch with amusement while his hands continued to worship the outlines of her breasts.

"Hadh't we agreed to forego teasing for tonight?"

"You agreed to forego teasing for tonight." He smirked. "Growing impatient, Granger, are we?"

"Uh. Oh...well, yes."

Thin lips, so used to being severe, turned into a small, true smile.

"Let me see what I can do about that," he murmured, and she was glad that the flat, quick rhythm of his breath betrayed his smug attitude when he began to caress the soft flesh behind her earlobe.

Sighing softly, her eyes fluttered shut, her world narrowing to the sensation of his touch when large, demanding hands swept down the sides of her stomach, disappearing beneath the waistband of her jeans. She never heard him murmur the vanishing spell, but within heartbeats, cool night air tickled her skin.

And then everything began to float as his mouth found the sensitive nub between her thighs, stroking and teasing it with his tongue. Through a fog of pleasure, she heard herself whimper. Little explosions, so different from those butterfly wing beats, shook her core, shattering it into thousands of sparkles of light.

She could hardly breathe when, ever so slowly, reality began to take form again. She blinked, reaching for him, and found him sitting beside her, watching her. His fingers still caressed her inner thighs, but it was the sight of his naked, aroused body that left her mesmerised and overwhelmed with a nearly unbearable need to feel him completely inside of her.

When she finally lifted her eyes to his gaze, she found dark orbs glittering with desire and satisfaction. Eyes never leaving his, Hermione moved to sit up on her knees, capturing his mouth while she sneaked her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair, savouring delicious heat of his naked skin.

"It's time, Severus. Make me yours," she demanded in a whisper while she pressed her pelvis softly against his pulsing erection. It was all it took to break through his last barrier of self-restraint.

With a low hiss of anticipation, he brought them down onto the mattress and moved above her; slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers.

"Mine," he breathed, an ardent claim on his lips as he entered her with one gentle push, filling her warm, waiting depths, and Hermione knew this was wholeness. And with each new thrust he made, time and space dissolved for her into nothing but heated skin on skin, mouth on mouth, until they both reached the completion of their desire. Afterwards, while she held him safely in her arms, waiting for the trembling of his frame to subside, there was nothing but silence and contentment, as nothing existed besides breathing and the tingling sensation of butterfly wing beats in her soul.

A long, gentle finger, tracing along the lines of her face, led her back from her place beyond reason. Turning her head to him, she fell into night-dark eyes that studied her pensively.

"Hey," she greeted him in a whisper, a smile playing around her mouth as she brushed his cheeks with her fingertips, his face relaxed and flushed from their lovemaking.

"Finally back again, are we?"

Awarding him with a most satisfied purr, she snuggled against his naked chest. "Not yet."

Tugging her head beneath his chin, he pulled her close into his embrace, murmuring a simple and sleepy, "I see." Yet, a moment later, she felt his arms tightening around her as he softly added like an afterthought, "I would only ask you, my love, to refrain from dissolving into thin air by the first light of day like a sylph."

Hermione couldn't help but smile against his salty skin. *Foolish man.* She would be right here in the morning, right here in his arms, in the arms where she belonged.

And one thought filled her soul with mischievous delight before the butterflies lured her finally into sleep.

Maybe she would write Rita a thank you letter.