

Into the Garden

by wingless

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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The Christmas festivities were in full swing. The Great Hall, garishly decorated by Albus Dumbledore himself, was bursting at the seams. The whole of the student body and staff were present; the resulting noise was already making Snape feel boxed in.

To say nothing of the headache that was beginning to make his head pound... he would have left this nightmarish event ages ago, or never appeared at all, were it not for the mandatory attendance Dumbledore had foisted upon them all.

The others didn't seem to mind, though, and were as exuberant as the youngsters. Even sourpuss Filch was swaying with the music, his dratted cat draped around his shoulders.

Hooch and Vector were dancing with some seventh years, and Hagrid was singing loudly and completely off-tune. Minerva and Albus were dancing, a style completely unbecoming to people their age. They should have left the gyrating and hip-thrusting to the students!

The rest of the staff was talking with each other, having generally a good time. Flitwick was for once not making a fool of himself by courting the prettiest witches, but was deep in conversation with Miss Granger.

Severus was bored enough to let his eyes linger on the display. Miss Granger had polished up quite nicely again and looked even more glamorous than she had at the Yule ball back in fourth year.

Unlike her compatriots, she didn't need tons of makeup or a push up bra to make her look interesting. 'Hang on: is that why Filius is sitting rather close to her?'

Severus frowned. His small colleague was never really indecent, but Severus found the occasional touches and pats he gave the young ladies inappropriate. The staff was well aware of the man's interest in the girls, but as long as his hands didn't stray into private territories, they pretended they didn't see.

Severus' eyebrow rose when he saw him take Miss Granger's hand and stroke it a little before doing something that looked like palm reading. The girl smiled, but didn't look embarrassed or offended at the liberties her teacher took. Muggle-borns... No sense of propriety!

With a huff, he wrenched his eyes away and stalked out of the Great Hall and into the gardens. It was freezing, and the cold air did nothing to alleviate his headache. In fact, it did quite the opposite, and he winced as the pounding got worse. Well, at least he had escaped the unbearable noise.

He walked along the rose bushes, which were thankfully not in bloom, listening for signs of amorous couples. With a smirk, he approached the first one, the rhythmic moaning and grunting hinting at more than just kisses. He steeled himself for a ghastly sight.

The first thing he saw when he pushed the bushes aside was red hair. Weasley! The girl under him was covered by his frame, his white arse shining in the pale moonlight.

Severus grimaced in disgust. He tried to guess the girl's identity and could only remember the boy's interest in Miss Granger. Severus' expression grew thunderous. How could she do the deed with this buffoon? Wait, wasn't she still inside with Flitwick? She'd better be!

"Cover yourself this instant!" he barked and was satisfied to hear both parties shriek in embarrassment. He looked away, not wanting to witness the boy's attempt to wrestle his todger into his trousers, nor did he want to see the cheap bit of trim the girl was displaying.

It took ages before the blushing lovers sheepishly tried to push past him, their clothes rumpled and a whiff of sex around them. "Twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley, and twenty from..." He paused to see who the girl was. "From Gryffindor again, Miss Brown."

They looked mutinous and horrified to have been found out, but quickly got out of sight. He watched them go before continuing with his rounds.

"Was that Ron?" a voice interrupted him, and he turned sideways to see Miss Granger standing there watching the retreating couple.

"Weasley and Brown," Severus told her, not sure why he was talking to her. She only harrumphed frostily, but her anger wasn't directed at him.

"Had enough of Filius?" he heard himself ask and winced as he noticed the impropriety of the topic.

"Is he always so," she gestured with her hands, "friendly?" she came up with, trying not to be disrespectful.

Severus snorted. "And he gets away with it every time," he said glumly.

Silence reigned between them, and he found himself reluctant to leave. As soon as he identified this sentiment, he strode away with barely a nod to her.

Hermione had no idea what suicidal impulse made her do it, but she ran after him and walked next to him. Snape stopped, expecting her to say something, but she just smiled a little unsurely.

"Can we just walk a bit? The noise in the Great Hall is horrendous, and the majority of males are drunk and too frisky for my taste," she told him.

"And why would I want to walk with you?" he sneered and got a teensy eye roll from her.

"You probably don't, but I wouldn't mind the company of someone whose drunken mind is not on conquest or presents."

He was a bit taken aback by her honesty. Can't Gryffindors understand the appeal of subtlety? "Are you sure you are not misjudging me?" he asked with the voice of a predator.

She didn't even blink. "Well, I don't know you well enough to speculate on your sexual proclivities," she said bluntly, "but I know that you aren't drunk and you have never shown an interest in me, so I presume I am safe." She sounded droll and altogether too self-assured.

"Miss Granger, I have no wish to burden myself with a lonely child, especially not one as bothersome as you." His tone was biting, but again she showed no reaction other than a calm stare.

"Fascinating," was her sighed reply, and Severus ground his jaw. "Can we walk quietly next to each other, searching for copulating idiots?" she asked with a wicked grin that he had never expected to see on her face.

His intent to deduct points was forgotten.

"The Head Girl needs to increase her quota," she added gleefully.

Deeply disconcerted by seeing a side of her he never expected or even imagined, he just turned and slowly continued with his walk. A grimace was the only reaction to feeling her fall into step with him.

She said nothing, and Severus found himself distracted by the gentle whooshing sound the fabric of her dress made with every step. She was so close that the hem of her attire touched his trousers occasionally, and he wished he had his cloak.

At the end of the path he made to turn right, but a hand on his arm stopped him. With a growl, he wrenched his arm free with unneeded force. "Don't touch me," he hissed, and his glare was lethal.

"Sorry," she said sincerely after reading his face, or as much as the moonlight allowed her to.

He knew his reaction was extreme, but she had put her hand on his Mark, and that was unacceptable.

"There are some pretty good hiding spots over there." She indicated with a move of her head and patiently waited for his reaction.

With forceful strides and a sneer, he walked past her, knowing she would follow. He should have shaken her off, or gone back to the Great Hall, but he found it more endurable to be in her company than go back to the abominable spectacle they called a Christmas party.

Once more they strode through the gardens, his fury slowly abating and flaring up again as she carefully touched his hand with a feather-light touch. She pressed a finger to her mouth, asking him to be quiet, and then pointed into a bush of brambles.

He raised his eyebrow in doubt. No one was stupid enough to make a love nest in this thorny place. Nor did he hear any suspicious noises. She raised her eyebrow challengingly and crossed her arms.

Severus snorted and made to walk away when he heard a moan. His lips curled at Hermione's small victory smile before blasting the bushes to smithereens.

He smirked when he heard Hermione's shocked gasp, but he ignored her and bellowed at the now uncovered couple. "Potter!" he spat, and the boy glared right back at him even though he was starkers.

They had used a rather impressive warming charm to allow them to frolic unclothed in the middle of December. Well, he wasn't about to tell them that. "Fifty points, Potter, and cover yourself."

Harry moved slowly and pressed Ginny's clothes into her trembling hands gentlemanly. It wasn't fast enough for Snape's taste, and he had them dressed with a spell in a second. "Now get out of here. If I ever see such a garish display again, it will be a hundred points," he warned.

Harry glared mutinously at the hated teacher, and Ginny kept her head down; neither of them saw Hermione standing nearby.

As soon as they were out of sight, Snape turned to his unwanted companion and found her standing with her back to him. "Don't get all huffy with me now. You were the one who found them," he said with a sneer.

"It's not that," she said and sounded in pain and slightly panicky.

Severus turned her towards him and didn't let go of her arm as he saw the blood on her face. "What happened?" he asked in obvious surprise.

"When you blasted the bushes, I must have got something into my eye," she said. "It rather stings," she added and gave him a weak smile.

"Look at me," he told her. She looked at him questioningly, blinking madly with her injured eye, but did as she was told without question. After seeing her trustingly raise her face for an inspection, he took her by the wrist and led her away.

She found herself following him, intrigued by the gentle way he dragged her along. She didn't question him when they suddenly found themselves somewhere near the Hospital wing.

He finally released her and walked up the stairs.

"Erm, good night, sir," she called after him, and he spun around to see the ridiculous picture she made with her furiously blinking and bleeding eye. He shook his head at her stupidity. "We are going to the infirmary," he told her and put a heavy emphasis on the 'we'. He took her arm again.

"Why? Are you sick?" she asked.

"Dammit, woman, you are the one with the bleeding eye and ask whether or not I'm sick?"

She looked at him in surprise. "It's bleeding? I thought the wetness was tears." He said nothing, but his huff told her what he thought of her.

"I can get there myself, sir."

He ignored her, and she didn't say anything else. He had forced himself to slow his long strides as he noticed he was dragging her along like a stubborn mule.

Poppy was in the infirmary. Not even the festivities would get her to leave her sanctum. She knew she would be needed tonight anyway. Christmastime always produced some patients. Alcohol abuse, love spells or potions, as well as fights, were the typical results. 'A time for love and harmony,' Severus thought with a scoff.

Hermione landed on the bed after a not so gentle shove from her teacher. "What happened to you, my dear?" the nurse asked, concerned.

"Got into a fight with brambles," she said innocently, and Poppy looked at Severus with narrowed eyes.

"What?" he asked defensively, even though he was responsible for her injuries.

"You, my boy, are the only one who loves to blow plants and bushes into pieces," the nurse said pointedly.

He hated being addressed as a boy in front of a student, but one look at Miss Granger showed him she was too busy with her pain to laugh at him.

"It was an accident," the girl said.

Ah, so she was paying attention to the conversation after all. However, she was not laughing, nor was she blaming him. Odd duck, he thought.

Poppy stopped glaring at her colleague and assessed Hermione's injury. "This will sting; try not to blink for a second," she told the girl.

Hermione's face looked almost comical as she tried her best to ignore the overwhelming urge to blink. She only hissed a breath through her teeth as Poppy removed whatever had been lodged in her eye.

The matron showed three thick thorns to Severus with accusation, and he glowered at her. She banished them and went to retrieve some eye drops.

"My apologies for causing you injury," he said stiffly to the young woman on the bed without looking at her.

"Don't worry; it wasn't your fault. Besides, I had a good time," Hermione said simply, and he dared to look at her.

She was looking at him with yet another smile. Seeing her red and inflamed eye and the blood running down her pretty face made him wince slightly.

"I can't say the same," he said. His tone wasn't as nasty as it could have been, but her smile faltered a little, and she looked away.

Poppy returned, and Severus watched her administer the eye drops, which apparently were worse than the injury itself, judging by how Hermione's hands twisted in the sheet. Then she cleaned the girl's face and put a horrible white patch over the eye to avoid infection.

The nurse allowed her to leave but demanded that she would return the next day for more eye drops.

"Thank you," Hermione murmured and hopped off the bed.

Her vision was horrible with only one eye, and her arms itched to stretch out and feel their way around. Severus noticed her hesitant steps and took her arm yet again.

"Where to, Miss Granger? Have you had enough excitement for tonight?"

She just smiled at his derisive tone. "I still have rounds to do to make sure everyone returns to their dormitory."

"I think it's time for little pirates to go to bed," he said dryly and heard her chuckle. He glanced down at her, and she turned her head up to look at him. His eyes narrowed. Having a laughing student on his arm was a complete novelty.

She was still smiling broadly. "It's my duty, though," she continued and bodily turned him into the corridor that would lead them back to the Great Hall. With a haughty sniff, he pushed back, and she had no choice but to follow his lead; she put up a good fight.

They were making a ridiculous display: Both of them were trying to manoeuvre the other into a different direction. He used his height and weight while she used more underhanded tactics and wound her way around him.

Severus was getting irritated with her, but he was also somewhat amused. With a grunt, he stopped and grabbed her hard before spinning her like a rag doll. When she finally stood with her back to him, he grasped her arms again and steered her towards Gryffindor tower.

"Not fair," she groused but was chuckling again. His own lips twitched for a moment before he put on his mask again. "It wouldn't be necessary if someone would be a good little lady and do as she was told."

She huffed in affront. "I told you I can do it. Shepherding little turds, erm, toads is not that hard!" She was grateful he couldn't see her blush at her blunt words, and Severus was glad he had learned to control his urge to laugh.

A small snort, though, he couldn't hold back. With a headshake, he let go of her, and she quickly turned. "By all means, continue with your foolish Head Girl duties, but don't come crying when they make use of your impaired vision to escape."

Hermione pressed her lips together to stop herself from laughing out loud, but her upturned lips gave her amusement away. She nodded at him. "Merry Christmas, sir," she said warmly and walked past him, not expecting an answer.

"Likewise," he said gruffly to her retreating back, and she looked over her shoulder with a smile. That had her running into a wall, though.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she quickly reassured, not wanting to be forcibly herded to her common room.

Severus pinched his nose before giving her a sardonically raised eyebrow.

"I'll be fine," she called again and walked away, this time putting one hand on the wall next to her, where her eye patch didn't allow her to see properly.

"You look ridiculous, girl," he snarled, suddenly standing right next to her, and Hermione gasped at his proximity.

She had not heard him make a single sound as he approached. "Did you hover over the floor?" she asked.

"Don't be absurd," he sniped, but was secretly pleased with his own stealth.

With a put-upon sigh, he took her arm for the umpteenth time and pulled her away from the wall. She trusted him enough to lower her arm and allow him to lead.

They walked silently back to the Great Hall, the noise getting louder the closer they got. Both visibly shrank from the abysmal ruckus. They looked at each other, the dismay clear on their faces.

"Well, thank you for an interesting Christmas, sir," she said sincerely.

"It was my pleasure to injure you, and would like to do it again", he commented, doing a horrible imitation of end-of-the-date last words.

"Why thank you, kind sir," she replied in kind, but her impressive chest quivered with suppressed chuckles.

The intimacy hit him like a lorry, and he released her quickly. "Go and do your job, Miss Granger," he said, all warmth gone from his voice and face. Hermione was smart enough to just nod and disappear through the doors.

Severus stood there for a moment, a disconcerted frown on his face. "Miss Granger, what happened to you, my dear?" He heard Filius' voice float through the closing doors.

With a snarl, Severus followed her into the room. Just because Dumbledore had forbidden him to leave until the party was over, of course. He had to endure another hour of drunken and obscene students and faculty alike. Joy!

"Miss Granger, I have yet to see you do your rounds in the garden," he snapped at her, glaring down at his colleague who had his arm wrapped around her. Due to his size, the arm was resting on her bottom, and Severus longed to slap it away.

"I'm sorry, sir; I shall do so now," she said contritely and marched away, her head moving restlessly to avoid running into anyone.

After a few minutes, Severus deemed it safe enough to follow, and they met in the cold gardens. "How much longer?" she asked him as he spotted her on a bench, rubbing her tired feet.

"An hour," he said and stayed where he was, but watched her rub her toes with an air of boredom that was entirely faked. "Aren't you cold?" he asked after a while.

"I cast a warming charm," she told him with a little yawn.

Only when she had stuffed her feet into her high-heeled shoes did he deem it safe to sit down next to her. He rubbed his temples, his earlier headache returning after the last minutes in the Hall.

"Headache?" she asked unnecessarily and held up a vial of pain reliever, not waiting for an answer.

"Where were you hiding that?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"You don't want to know," was her cheeky response.

His eyes scanned her body for a second, trying not to think of places that could hide a vial on her person. She definitely did not have a handbag or any pocket on her flimsy gown.

He downed half the contents and then gave it back to her. She looked at him questioningly. "For your feet," he said and felt silly.

She took it with a pleased smile and drank the rest and licked her lips.

Severus was speechless, not by her tongue snaking out to wet those plump lips, but by the simple fact that she hadn't sterilized the vial before drinking from it. Anyone else would have wiped it vigorously to erase all signs of his saliva or not accepted the vial at all.

"Ah, that's better," she sighed and wriggled her feet happily. "So, Professor, shall we go for another stroll round the gardens to escape the tumultuous party?"

"Very well; we can't have you stumble in the dark," he said.

"How chivalrous," she simpered, but was amused.

"No cheek from you, or I'll hex another eye patch on your face and secure both of them permanently!" he threatened.

"I consider myself warned," she said dutifully and got off the bench.

After a few minutes, he held up his arm. Hermione was just about to take it when he lowered it again, an unhappy frown on his face. She didn't wait for him to withdraw completely. With great care, she slipped her hand into his and was not surprised when he stopped walking.

"This is..."

"You giving me support," she finished in a no nonsense way.

He shook his head and pulled back.

"Please," she whispered, and the one big eye that wasn't covered by gauze burned into his.

He pulled away and pretended not to notice her disappointed expression.

"Is this a game to you?" he began heatedly, his paranoia getting the better of him.

"No", she said loudly and vehemently. "I just happen to like... this." She gestured between them.

"Why?" he demanded, sounding needy even to his own ears.

"I'm not sure. I just know I do. Can you explain why you have been pleasant, well, less nasty than usual?"

He frowned. No, he had no idea what had made him behave rather civilly and almost courteous. He looked at her, trying to gauge her sincerity by her facial expression. She was a Gryffindor, and they're bad actors, or so he always thought.

She had been full of surprises that night, so unlike the bossy know-it-all she used to be. Was she acting now? Had she been drugged? He asked her just that.

"I have not!" she said indignantly and put her hands on her hips, a universal sign of female annoyance.

"Look, I am not trying to snare you, or turn this into a one-night-stand," she rambled. "Can't we just enjoy tonight, if nothing else?"

He studied her like an interesting new specimen. "You are a student," was all he could come up with and was waiting for her reply on tenterhooks.

"Only for a few more months. Besides, I am of age, and relationships are not forbidden between teachers and students who have reached the age of seventeen."

At the word "relationship," he stepped backwards. This was all too much. How could the evening have progressed to this? Why was he still here?

"I said I am not trying to snare you. I don't know you well enough. I just find myself... attracted to you. But don't ask me to explain why. I just am," she said angrily as she noticed his withdrawal. He did not move.

With a sigh, she turned away from him so that he was now looking at her shoulder. It was easier to talk when she didn't look at him.

"I do confess that I have not the slightest idea of how to deal with this," he pressed out before he lost his nerve.

"Me neither," she sighed again. "I apologize if I have been too forward." She did not move either. Then she visibly steeled herself. "If... if there is no chance in hell that you could ever... like me, please tell me now."

"What was that about not wanting to snare me?" he asked with a sneer.

"I changed my mind," she said calmly.

"My, aren't we flighty?" he mocked, but she just waited for him to answer the question.

He thought about it. He didn't know her. He had never looked at her and seen more than an annoying student. But tonight had surprised him, and pleasantly so. She wasn't ugly, either: not hard on the eye at all. Did he even want a... GULP... relationship? And what about her age?

She was roughly half his age. It didn't bother him as much as it probably should. She was more mature than others of her age...

Was he attracted to her? He didn't know. But he was not disgusted by her, and disgust was what he usually felt for his students. But would she return to being insufferable tomorrow?

Was he really contemplating this?

She stalked away with fast strides; apparently his inner monologue had taken a bit too long. He ran after her and knew in that moment that he was at least somewhat interested.

He wrapped his hand around her bicep gently and stopped her. "I'm running after you, and not for the first time tonight. Is that enough for now?" Not the most romantic statement, but that was pure Snape.

She looked at him from under long lashes and nodded silently. Yes, she was just as vulnerable as him.

She stretched her hand out again, but with an eye roll, he offered her his arm. "Holding hands is immature and not befitting a man of my age," he said imperiously.

"Ah, is that so?" she answered and linked her arm with his. "So, snogging in public is out of the question?"

His steps faltered. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," he said gruffly, trying to smother his nervousness.

Her pearly laugh floated through the air, and he felt elated. He had no idea what would come of this, but he was willing to try. Try something new. Voldemort was dead, after all.

Tonight had been one of the most pleasant evenings he'd had since he had joined the Hogwarts staff many years ago, if not since forever, so he would enjoy tonight. His expectations weren't high.

They walked around the garden, not caring where their feet were carrying them. When they reached the farthest edge, where the sounds from the party were not carrying over to them anymore, Hermione stopped and stood in front of him.

He watched perplexed and self-conscious as she mapped his face in the dim light. "I don't think I've ever actually seen you up close," she whispered and sounded regretful.

A hesitant finger crept up, and he swallowed against his suddenly dry throat. When her finger made contact with his cheek, his eyes fluttered. He stood transfixed as she pulled his hair away to expose his features, and he frowned in discomfort.

"You have rather stunning cheekbones," she told him.

It was a nice thing to say, even though he doubted her sincerity. He drew his head back and let his hair fall back into place.

She looked disappointed. "I like your face. Don't hide," she said almost sternly, but didn't press him. Instead she hugged him, and this time he could not sense any hesitation.

Her face was pressed against his chest, and he heard her inhale. "Are you sniffing me?" he asked incredulously, still standing stiffly and making no move to hug her back. Afraid he smelt badly, he pressed his arms down to hide any possible odour coming from his armpits.

"You smell lovely," she murmured.

"Of what?" he asked, suddenly interested.

"You smell manly," she responded.

"Hmmpf," he said, nonplussed. He had passed over the whole 'How-to-deal-with-the-fairer-sex' period altogether. It was a little like throwing a Neanderthal into modern times.

"Mmmhh," she replied.

He felt a little odd with her display, even though it was harmless. He was not used to physical contact; he shied away from it. "This is... I can't..." he tried and faltered before gently pushing her away, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

She looked surprised and a bit hurt.

"I can't deal with... physical closeness," he confessed, telling her the obvious, he thought, but finding it necessary to do so.

Her expression made him suddenly fear that he was losing her faster than he expected. His jaw clenched in annoyance. He was annoyed at himself, about his inability to be 'human', or at least react like one. And he was annoyed with her for expecting too much, too quickly.

"Can you have sex?" she asked bluntly, and his eyes almost goggled. Before that could happen, he closed them tightly and pinched his nose.

He opened them quickly in case she decided to run off again. But she was still there, waiting patiently for his answer.

"You might want to try the Slytherin approach. Less bluntness is something I can appreciate."

She just snorted. "No, you're Slytherin enough for the two of us!"

"I'm not a virgin," he pressed through tight lips when it was obvious that she wouldn't let it go.

"Nice diplomatic Slytherin answer," she praised. "Is sex problematic for you?" she tried.

"Miss Granger! You are as tenacious as a bloody niffler when he's searching for gold," he cried and turned away.

"I doubt that was a compliment," she said wryly, and he snorted. "Okay, don't answer. I'm probably being too forceful. As you said: we will cross that bridge when we get to it."

He was grateful for the reprieve. He just couldn't tell her that he had never slept with a woman he loved, or even liked. And he was not going to tell her that he only had two partners in his whole miserable life.

The first had been a whore, and he had been in his early twenties. After hearing horribly faked orgasms and fake platitudes about his technique, he had never ever touched whores again.

The other had been a married woman ten years his senior. She had approached him because of his dark looks and had led him to a bedroom that was also a torture chamber.

She had been looking for rough and painful sex. He had tried to oblige, grateful for any sexual action, but he could not find anything pleasurable in her domineering ways. He had fled as soon as she had wanted to return the favour of anal sex and pulled a strap-on out of a drawer.

And he was definitely not going to tell her that he had unwilling experiences with same-sex partners. That's what every Death Eater had to go through in the eternal struggle for power within the ranks.

Hermione had noticed that he was somewhere else with his thoughts, and judging by his scowl, he wasn't remembering anything fond.

She wanted to hug him; she had always been a tactile person, at least with those she loved, but after being rejected by him once, she didn't want to get that reaction again.

She took his hand, and he snapped out of his ruminations. He frowned again, and she almost groaned with disappointment at his displeasure about this simple touch. When he only offered her his arm, she beamed at him happily.

"So, Miss Granger, what are your plans for after graduation?" He changed subjects, and she let him. They wandered along the edge of the garden while he listened patiently and with obvious interest to her long-winded speech.

It was different from hearing her endless prattle during class, and he enjoyed her detailed thoughts. "So you'll be renting a flat?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, it definitely needs a fireplace so I can connect it to... others," she finished lamely, not wanting to be too overbearing.

"I presume you will hook it up to Hogwarts?" he asked casually, skirting around the subject as well.

"Sounds reasonable. It would allow me to visit... friends," she said and cleared her throat. "This is ridiculous," she mumbled. "If I want to see you after I graduate, would it be okay to Floo to Hogwarts?" she rushed out.

"Yes, if we are both still inclined to see each other," he answered carefully, not wanting to get his hopes up. "However, the only Floo that admits people from outside Hogwarts is in Dumbledore's office," he warned.

"Is that supposed to put me off?" she asked, not quite getting his meaning.

"Not at all, I found it prudent to warn you that repeated visits will be noticed and talked about."

"I would not want to hide our relationship!" she began indignantly. "If that is what we'll be having. If not, I would like to visit my... friend," she added hastily as she saw him stiffen.

Severus tried to hide his jumbled feelings by looking at his pocket watch. "We should return to the party, or our absence will be missed."

Was he dismissing her? She just could not read him. "Very well... sir," she said with an unhappy frown. "Is that it?" she tried one last time.

He looked at her uncomprehendingly; he had no idea how to behave with a newfound... conquest... lady friend... lover? Scratch that last.

"Severus?" she said, trying to regain his attention. He looked up sharply, and she waited for a cutting remark, but none came.

"Forgive me my ineptitude," he grumbled. "Am I supposed to be doing something? Or give some universal sign of not being adverse to... more?"

She would never know how much it had cost him to say those words and admit his inexperience. He looked at her sharply, daring her to laugh, but she simply looked at him happily.

"We can seal this with a kiss," she said in a hopeful yet shy way. "Or not," she pointed out quickly when he stiffened yet again.

She scratched her head in frustration. Never had communicating with a male been so difficult. He wasn't the first man she had approached or had been approached by, but Severus Snape was in a class all of his own.

Once more, she stood in front of him and grasped his hands, ignoring his flinch. "I would like to get to know you, Severus. And if you don't want to draw attention to yourself by associating with a student, I will wait until after graduation. Is that agreeable so far?"

A sharp nod was his response. "Good. Would you like to meet during my last months here, say after class, or in the evenings, or would you like to wait until later?"

"I have to think about it," he said quickly, not wanting to appear too silly with his indecision again.

She must have sensed something in his face, though. "Am I rushing you?" she asked wryly.

"No, it's just that I find the whole situation... unreal," he said honestly.

She bent forward to kiss his nose. He looked at her as if she had gone mad, but she only shrugged. "You can be rather endearing," she quipped.

"Madam..."

"Oh, I like the sound of that," she purred, and he gulped nervously.

"Are you into... that?" he asked urgently.

"What?" she asked nonplussed.

"Do you like to combine sex with pain and... toys?" Now it was her turn to goggle at the turn the conversation had taken.

Severus flushed and tried to look unaffected, but did not have much success with that.

"I do not like the whole Dominatrix thing," she said and heard him sigh happily. "But I don't mind a few toys," she confessed.

This really was the weirdest getting-to-know-you talk ever!

He just looked at her apprehensively. Hermione shuffled her feet. She wasn't shy in bed, but his intense eyes made her knees weak.

"I do like anal toys," she said and saw him flinch. "For myself mostly, and my partner if he is so inclined. But I don't think you are..." She trailed off.

"No," he rasped out, stunned to be having this kind of talk with her. With anyone, for that matter. 'Gods, make her shut up before my mouth runs away with me and sprouts tales about my pitiful sex life,' he thought.

"Can we save the sex talk for another time?" she asked, and he looked down at her wearily. "Can I have a kiss instead?"

Great, from one quagmire into the next. "Isn't it a bit early for this?" he asked, knowing he would sound like a frigid virgin.

Hermione looked surprised but gave in with a nod. "Are you letting me down gently?"

He didn't understand the terminology, and it showed on his suddenly horribly expressive face. "Are you trying to get rid of me?" she explained.

"No," he said, surprised.

"Okay, it's just that you're looking ready to bolt."

"Well, that might be due to the talk with definitely too much emphasis on sex for my taste," he snapped defensively.

She wasn't wounded, but tried desperately to understand him and not offend him at every turn. She really wanted to give it a try with this man on more than a casual basis.

"Are you afraid I might jump you? Because I won't. I do want to get to know you, and while I won't pretend not to be interested in the physical aspects, I have more interest in you as a person."

Her earnest words calmed him a little, and he already felt juvenile for his little outburst.

"Come on, let's continue walking. We had such a nice conversation earlier."

He just snorted, but followed her.

"Yes, you had a lot to say," he said dryly, slowly regaining his equilibrium.

"Just interrupt me when I won't shut up," she said seriously. She had heard from various sources that she had the tendency to keep yapping for hours on end once she found something of interest.

"So, before we talk about less provoking matters, you still have to answer my question."

"Which one?" Gods, scatterbrain. Do pay attention to the woman!

"The one where you can tell me whether or not you want to wait until I have graduated before we officially see each other."

"I said I would think about it!"

"I didn't think you'd need a week to come to a decision."

"I might have formed one already had we not strayed into sexual forays!"

"Good point. How will you let me know once you come to decision?"

"I'll give you a detention."

"Don't you dare! Send me a bloody school owl."

"Language, my dear. Or I shall have to punish you."

"Are you sure you are not into spanking or role-play?"

"..."

"Forget I asked!"

"How bloody experienced are you, Miss Granger?"

"What happened to keep talking about safe topics?"

"I deem talking about your experiences rather safe."

"..."

"Well?"

"I am not a virgin."

"That was rather disappointing."

"I have had four partners. None from Hogwarts. All Muggles I have met in clubs during the last summer holidays."

"Busy holidays."

"Stop mumbling. And you asked for it!"

"Very well, do continue, Madam."

"Oh, I really like hearing that..."

"Miss Granger, stop drooling. On with the tale!"

"Hmmpff! Anyway, I have found I very much prefer older men..."

He choked on his own saliva but managed to rasp out, "How old?"

"The youngest man, and the first one I slept with, was twenty-six. The next men were thirty-two, twenty-eight and the last one a whopping thirty-nine."

By now, Severus was wheezing helplessly.

"Yes, my sweet Professor, any more questions?"

"N-no, n-not yet."

Hermione grinned to herself while Severus had a hard time catching his breath.

This little slip of a girl, well, woman, looked so innocent.

"I must confess that I am somewhat shocked to find out that you..."

"Have a sexual appetite?"

"Yes. I have never noticed you take an interest in something that has no pages."

"You've never noticed me, full stop."

"One can't help but notice you. Maybe not in a favourable light, but notice you I did!"

Hermione smiled at his blunt answer. He really wasn't one for pretty lies.

She clung to his arm a little tighter, ridiculously happy at that moment. But he had slowed his steps and become oddly stiff again.

"What is bothering you now?" she asked not unkindly.

"Would you stay with a man who can't satisfy you sexually?"

Hermione ground to a halt, but he wouldn't even look at her. Without a word she resumed walking, and he followed jerkily.

"I'm quite easy to please, I have found. And if I want something, I have no qualms about asking for it. And I find it very exciting to learn with a new partner. I don't expect a perfect lover; the idea is to get to know each other and learn what you like!"

Both were painfully aware that they were talking about him, but the way she spoke about it took the edge of his panic away.

"I have not... They didn't..." he began, but gave up with a shake of his head.

Hermione didn't force him, even though she was horribly interested. "Another time," she whispered and stopped to kiss his cheek.

Severus closed his eyes, wanting to savour the first, genuine sign of attraction from a woman who seemed to actually like him.

A small smile graced his lips, but the moon disappeared behind a cloud and plunged them in darkness.

As soon as the cloud moved on, he stared at her upturned face and slowly bent down.

She closed her eyes trustingly, and he chuckled in a manly, appreciative way. That seemed to come naturally to even the most inexperienced of men.

"Tease," she murmured when he moved too slowly, and she grabbed him by the neck to pull him down.

Despite her demanding action, her kiss was gentle and, dare he say it, sweet. This was his first ever kiss, and he hoped it wasn't showing.

Kissing whores just wasn't done, and the Dominatrix had only nipped or bit him. None of the males he had been forced to be with had felt a desire to kiss him, nor vice versa.

She moaned in pleasure, and he drew back in alarm.

"I'm sorry. What did I do wrong?" he asked gruffly, but sounded rather miserable, wondering more and more what made him speak so freely that night.

"Nothing! I was enjoying myself," she answered, scrutinising his reaction. He looked relieved before schooling his features.

"You are an expert kisser," she said and kissed him again. This time, he was the one moaning when her tongue gently traced his lips. He was close to confessing that he wasn't an expert at all, but the Slytherin in him forbid it.

"You've been pathetic enough for today. Pretend to be good at something!"

He thought he gave himself away when he almost choked her trying to get his own tongue into her mouth. She released him, and her smirk told him she knew the truth about his skills without him having to say it.

"I'm a fast learner," he said gruffly.

"That you are," she agreed breathlessly and attacked his mouth again.

He enjoyed himself immensely until his cock surged upwards, and he took a step backwards. He was doing that a lot that night. He clenched his fists and tensed his entire body, willing the erection away.

Hermione watched him tense, not sure as to why he was doing that odd routine, but then it came to her. "Are you aroused?"

That blunt question and the humiliation that came with it deflated him quicker than he thought possible. He made an angry sound in the back of his throat.

"There's no need to hide it. That's the idea, isn't it? Besides, I'm just as affected as you, just not visibly."

"Gods, you're blunt, woman," he snapped, rankled at the apparent ease with which she discussed anything sexual.

She shrugged. "I haven't always been like that. During the first six years at Hogwarts, I had been as shy and awkward as..."

"Me?" he snarled.

"No, as Ron," she corrected.

"Please don't mention the freckled fainéant. I had an unwanted insight into bits that should not be exposed to all and sundry."

"Ah," was all she said, and Severus noticed her cold demeanour.

"Why so sullen? Did you wish for his attentions rather than mine?"

"Don't play Mr. Offended. I have no romantic interest in Ron," she assured him before he had a chance to get all huffy. "He just said some unsavoury things earlier on after I refused to dance with the drunken lout."

"Do I want to hear what he said?"

"He called me a frigid bitch who needs to understand that books will never be able to sprout a penis and show me a real good time. That was a quote, by the way."

Severus snorted. "Well, we both know that you are nothing of the sort, and there is no need to convince him of the truth. Unless... you made all that up to impress me and lord it over me to..."

He stopped short when he heard her growl. A rather kittenish growl, but a growl nonetheless.

"Before you manage to sound more like Ronald Weasley, I would advise you to shut up."

To her surprise, he did just that.

"Why would I lie? With wizards there is always the danger that you would turn the tables on me and call me a slut for having more than one partner and not having a ring on my finger."

"My paranoia gets the best of me at times," was the closest he could come to an apology at that moment.

"You can make it up with a hug," she said tartly, and with only a moment's hesitation, he did just that.

He was a little stiff and certainly unpractised, but he was willing to learn.

"You're not hugging a Blast-Ended Screw; you may relax a little," she whispered, and he tried to.

His arms were wrapped around her small frame, and he didn't know where to put his hands.

"Like this," Hermione mumbled into his frock coat and hugged him tightly. Severus rearranged his arms and found it surprisingly easy after a little instruction.

He felt comfortable with her, which was more than he expected since he couldn't remember ever feeling comfortable in close proximity to another person.

He let himself be comforted by her intense hug and fought his natural urge to flee from such an invasive act.

"Can we write to each other?" she spoke up, obviously sensing his wish to take things slowly.

"Yes, that sounds acceptable. And after graduation, we can see where things will lead."

"Okay, Severus," she said through a yawn.

One of her hands dropped lazily to his bottom and palmed a cheek lovingly.

"Miss Granger!"

She only giggled and squeezed him once more before pretending to be a good little girl.

Severus felt a surge of something that felt suspiciously like happiness, and he expressed it wordlessly by hugging her tightly.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "I do believe I found out where you hid that vial."

Her entire body trembled with her silent chuckles. "Would you like to check if you're correct?"

"Miss Granger!"

He relaxed again and leaned back a little to look at the little pirate look-alike he was currently holding. For once he got a great present, even though he hadn't asked for it.

Fin

As always, I'd like to express my gratitude to my beta, moonrevel.