

Rumour Has It

by Subversa

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 6

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??

Author's Annoying Note: I'm back after a long absence because SubHub was bitten by a plot bunny, and his enthusiasm infected me with enthusiasm for the nasty bunny's idea.

And how could I decline to write SSHG again after such a long absence?

The storyline is SubHub's, which means you can expect a bit of adventure and a lot of humour. The words are mine.

The world and the characters belong exclusively to JKR.

My incomparable Golden Trio passed on this fic: Alpha reading by Shug (sshg316), Beta reading by DeeMichelle, and Brit-picking by MagicAlly.



Rumour Has It

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 1

Severus Snape stretched in his bed as lazily as a cat and with as much finesse. An observer might have noted the smooth ripple of muscle beneath the skin of his back, or the flex of long, elegant fingers as he completed the manoeuvre, but there was no one to watch, for he was completely and agreeably alone. Furthermore, the day was his to do with as he wished, as were all of his days, now...there were no students awaiting his supervision, no fellow teachers to silently study and unfairly judge him, no maniacal 'mentor' to steal his youth and find his performance forever wanting. He was a solitary man of reclusive habits living a gloriously sequestered existence.

Life had bloody well never been so satisfactory before.

He stood from his bed, pyjama pants hanging upon narrow hips, and padded into the loo to perform his morning ablutions. Hot water from the shower sluiced the soap from a body which had seen its share of hardship in more than forty years of life, but he spared scarcely a thought for its relative lack of beauty as he towelled himself dry. The horrific scar at his throat, which not all the Healers' skill had sufficed to mend, no longer drew his eye; he was thankful to be alive, and it was enough.

He took the minimum amount of time to comb his shoulder length hair, shave, and brush his teeth before donning his usual garb, dressing completely before leaving his room, as he did every day: Crisp white linen, familiar black wool, and overall, black robes. And when he sallied forth in search of his first cup of black coffee, his robes might have been said to billow in his wake.

Post-war wizarding Britain had seen some changes, both those favourable and those less so. One change which had benefitted Severus involved the house-elves of the Death Eaters whose property had been confiscated by a furious Ministry of Magic. The house-elves, torn from the homes they had served all their lives, had been auctioned off like livestock, and the funds had gone into trust for the maintenance and education of the orphans whose parents had died in the war.

Severus' thin lips curved nastily as he recalled the so-called indignation of the chronic bellyachers, who were, of course, amongst Potter's crowd. They had shown up en masse...*both* of them...to 'protest' the sale of sentient beings. Severus had paid them no mind at all. He had taken the indecent amount of gold the Ministry had awarded him whilst he still occupied a bed at St Mungo's...reparations for a lifetime of service to his country...and he had purchased a house-elf to ease his life at Spinner's End. He had attended the auction more out of curiosity than anything, doubtful that his resources would extend to the purchase of a servant, but the discovery of Gabs the house-elf had sealed his decision. Surely unearthing a creature whose previous mad mistress, Bellatrix Lestrange, had cursed the pathetic elf into permanent silence, was providence. Here was an opportunity to acquire willing hands to perform all the unpleasant tasks which were a necessary part of home ownership without having to endure unwanted chatter. As his old Granny Snape would have said, it was meant to be.

Stalking now into his cramped kitchen, a space which had been made somehow open and inviting by the hardworking Gabs, Severus frowned at the empty coffee pot.

'Where's my coffee?' he demanded brusquely.

Gabs did not have the facility to form words, but he had the ability to communicate more clearly with looks and gestures than most of Severus' former students had managed with the full use of their annoying voices. Just now, the house-elf responded to his master's question with a withering glance at Severus, followed by a pointed look at the clock on the wall.

What, only half-past seven? Severus usually didn't arrive at the breakfast table until eight.

'Well, get busy!' he snapped, seating himself at the table. 'And where's my newspaper?'

The answer to this query was a shrug of the elf's shoulders as he busied himself brewing coffee. Gabs was perfectly capable of producing a cup of coffee with the snap of his bony fingers, but he well knew his master preferred freshly ground beans brewed the old-fashioned way.

Severus sighed with impatience and stared out the open window, watching for the owl which would deliver his *Daily Prophet*. He lived alone, but that was no reason to become sloppy in one's habits. Like clockwork, six mornings out of seven, by nine o'clock, he was at his desk in the cellar, hard at work. If this work on some mornings consisted of nothing more taxing than reading up on the subject of his current fancy, that was no one's business but his own. By one o'clock, after ingesting a light luncheon, he would go out to attend to errands, and as often as not, he found himself at the Ministry of Magic, lost in the stacks of the National Wizarding Archives.

His government's belated recognition of his efforts had been tardy, but it had been deliciously *guilty*, and therefore, embarrassingly generous. Not that Severus was embarrassed. He was far too satisfied to suffer from such a fatuous emotion. An excess of gold in his Gringotts vault gave him the leisure to immerse himself in the subject matter of his own choosing, and if such engrossment yielded a train of thought Severus felt an urge to put to parchment, then a scholarly article bearing his name might appear in a wizarding periodical.

Idly, he pulled the pile of morning post before him and extracted his reading glasses from the interior pocket of his robes, perching them above the pronounced hook which never failed to keep them in place. He began to riffle through the stack, the smell of percolating coffee offering the promise of relief to come. He flicked the parchment engraved with his solicitor's name...a bill, no doubt...from the top of the stack, and smirked when next he recognised the handwriting of one of his self-confessed 'fans'. Gladiola Jambull was a witch of fifty-plus years who had, supposedly, fallen 'in love' with the 'spy who won Dumbledore's war'. She wrote impassioned, adoring letters once or twice a week, and Severus could only be thankful that her husband was a sensible man...otherwise, he would be watching his back for jealous-husband retaliation day and night.

He set the fan mail aside and glanced out the window again, pleased to see a brown barn owl approaching his kitchen window rather like a bat out of hell. He frowned as the harassed-looking bird lit upon the table, upsetting the salt cellar.

'Watch yourself,' he snapped irritably. 'And where's my newspaper?'

The owl ruffled its feathers and held out its leg, offering the missive tied there.

'All right,' Severus grumbled, unfastening the leather thong. 'Have an owl treat,' he added, gesturing toward the dish near the window sill.

But the owl screeched loudly and launched itself through the opening into the morning air, beating its wings wildly.

'That bird is *touched*,' Severus observed to Gabs as the silent house-elf placed a mug brimming with strong black coffee before him.

Gabs' only response was to start violently and thrust his finger toward the swiftly departing bird, which was dipping and weaving unsteadily, as if an unseen force were constraining its headlong flight.

'Now what?' Severus demanded, wondering if it were now to fall to his lot to somehow relieve avian insanity...and then he was struck to silence by the sight of the grumpy barn owl exploding in a shower of blood, bone, and feathers.

Severus blinked once, as if to clear his vision, and looked again, but there were still pathetic brown and white feathers wafting about in the breeze.

'That's not typical behaviour for a common barn owl,' he said aloud, and his gaze was drawn to the somewhat grubby envelope he had retrieved from the now-defunct bird.

His name was on the letter, though not written by hand; in fact, it had been cut from the cover of *Witch Weekly*. He recognised the sickly pink background to the stark black of the block letters spelling out 'SNAPE'. His eagerly anticipated coffee forgotten, he took up his butter knife and slit open the envelope. The folded parchment slid onto the

tabletop, and he used the tip of the knife to lift the edge, successfully laying the piece of cheap flatware along the edge of the missive. There was no harm in being careful, was there? No one knew better than he the dangers posed by colourless, odourless poison.

As his eyes strained to focus, letters and entire words cut from various printed material swirled madly, then arranged themselves into readable format. Mutely, he read through the words, then closed his eyes and blindly reached for his coffee.

This was going to require a substantial quantity of caffeine.

Snape,

We have the love of your life. If you ever want to see her alive again, you will do as you're told. NO MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT. If you contact the Ministry, she dies. If you don't do as you're told, she dies.

SHE DIES.

Bring ten thousand Galleons in a bag and leave it at the National Wizarding Archives in the conveniently located book return box before midnight tonight.

Please find enclosed indisputable proof that we have her. Do as you're told and the love of your life will live to love again.

The Captors

Severus took up the discarded envelope and peered inside. It would seem that the fools had seen fit to send him, by owl post, a rat's tail. With a grimace of disgust, he dumped the item onto the aged yellow Formica tabletop. Upon closer inspection, he decided it was hair...probably human, if it was, indeed, from the head of the 'love of his life'.

He poked the unremarkable brown mat of hair, and a faintly familiar odour rose from it.

Severus read through the words again, a pucker between his brows, and then pushed the mess aside, reaching instead for the jam pot. Taking up his spoon, he dipped strawberry jam from the pot and began to spread it on his toast with the back of his spoon.

Perhaps the most puzzling feature of the nonsensical note was the identity of the supposed 'love of his life'. No such person existed.

The meeting he had borne with the shade of Lily Evans Potter in the murk above his bleeding body in the Shrieking Shack had been short and to the point. His oldest, dearest friend had assured him that any debt he owed her was paid in full by his care of her offspring. Her next message had been rather more succinct.

'No, you can't come with me! Get back into your body! You're not finished!'

He bit off a piece of toast and chewed thoughtfully. If not for the exploding owl, he might have been tempted to consider the entire thing a joke, however poorly conceived. But a set of persons who were willing to explode an owl to prevent detection were not a group to be trifled with. And the admonition not to involve Magical Law Enforcement bespoke some criminal sophistication. After all, if he *had* been in possession of such a thing as a love of his life, he would have been a perfect mark for kidnappers...well, his monetary windfall was public knowledge, wasn't it? As was his rather unfortunate tendency to cling to the object of his affections with the tenacity of a niffler with a shiny knick-knack.

He took up his fork and lifted scrambled eggs to his lips, his gaze fixed upon the sugar bowl as if it were the repository of great wisdom. How, then, was he to discern the identity of the kidnap victim? He was not intimate with any women...to be honest, he wasn't even *friendly* with any women...and the ransom note had specified that the person was a *she*. Well, at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that the extortionists didn't think he was gay.

Not that there was anything wrong with that, of course. It just wasn't his cup of tea, as it were.

He took up his napkin and fastidiously wiped his mouth, reaching for the parchment again with the other hand. The blackguards asked for the gold to be left in the Archives ... wasn't that an odd request? Of course, he spent a good bit of his free time dawdling about the Archives, as any observant sort of person would know.

The Archives. The scent still lingering in his nostrils was *from* the Archives. That was where he knew it from. But whom did he know at the Archives?

As understanding dawned, his eyes closed, and he drew his spectacles from his face, reaching with a long-suffering sigh to sharply pinch the bridge of his nose.

'Oh, no. It *couldn't* be.' He opened his eyes again to find the puzzled gaze of Gabs upon him, and addressed his next words to the house-elf. 'Why do these things always happen to me?'

He stood with sudden resolution and dropped his napkin upon the tabletop. He tucked the ransom note into his robes, checked for his Gringotts key, and spoke gruffly to Gabs without bothering to look at the elf again.

'I shan't be home for lunch,' he said, sweeping past Gabs with a purposeful stride. 'If and when the *Prophet* comes, leave it on my desk. I'm off to ...' He frowned. Perhaps it would be best not to advertise his whereabouts. He continued out his garden door without completing his sentence.

He took a deep breath of the crisp October air, his senses popping with an exhilarating air of purpose. So, someone was missing? It was very bad, to be sure...but ah! It was great to be doing something again!

He turned on the spot and was gone.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 6

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??



Rumour Has It

Chapter 2

by Subversa and SubHub

Severus stepped into the cavernous main room of the National Wizarding Archives, the artificial light provided by the Magical Maintenance Department filtering down through the motes of dust, giving the place an uncanny resemblance to an ancient cathedral. His lip curled at the thought. Were the Archives not indeed just that? A place of worship for those with a reverence for antiquities and books and learning?

He looked toward the large, circular desk which graced the centre of the room, and the first item on his mental checklist was ticked off: Only one figure stood behind the mahogany edifice, and it was not the Reference Librarian, but her dim-witted assistant. The assistant was a tiny girl, with wispy blonde hair and large, nearly round blue eyes that gave her the perpetual appearance of a startled hare.

'Sir!' the girl bleated, seeming truly surprised to see him. 'Prof...'

She stopped, as if remembering an oft-repeated admonition, and one of her hands rose to cover her mouth, before slowly dropping again. Interesting. Had her superior reprimanded her for using his out-dated title?

'Sir!' she repeated, persevering. 'I didn't expect to see you here today!'

He swept up to the desk, towering over the girl. What was her name? She had been a first-year when he taught Defence ... a Muggle-born, she had not been at school the year of his Headmastership ... she had lost a family member in the war ... a sibling?

Ah, now he had it.

'Good morning, Miss Creevey,' he greeted Dennis Creevey's younger sister. 'Why did you not expect to see me here today?'

The child flushed, as if pleased to have her name remembered, and answered. 'Because Hermione's on holiday,' she said, as if that explained everything.

Severus followed the direction of her out-flung hand and frowned at the brass plaque resting on the Reference Librarian's desk. 'And why would the presence or absence of Miss Granger dictate my movements?' he wondered aloud, slanting a glance down at the earnest young person.

'Because you might have gone with her,' Miss Creevey proclaimed, as if her statement made perfect sense.

Severus couldn't help himself. He knew he ought to maintain a calm demeanour to encourage the little twit to keep talking, but he would not permit such cheek to pass unremarked.

'What are you babbling about?' he demanded icily. 'Have you lost your mind?'

Sara Creevey seemed to collapse upon herself, as if his sharp words had deflated her. 'I'm sorry, sir...I didn't mean...!' The girl turned from him and snatched up a newspaper and thrust it at him. 'But everybody knows!'

Severus plucked the paper from her, noting with a scowl that it was the previous day's evening edition of the *Daily Prophet*. It was quite thin, which was why he had never bothered with the evening edition; he preferred the full morning edition of the paper. Yet there, below the fold, was 'Me, Myself, and I', the gossip column written by the ever-annoying Rita Skeeter, and there was his name, in bold black typeface.

Lips pressed in a thin, white line, Severus perched his reading glasses on his nose and began.

A Succubus for Severus Snape?

by RITA SKEETER

The National Wizarding Archives, London *The scholarly quiet of the National Wizarding Archives has become the site of a scandal of no small scope, and this reporter has spared no effort to bring the story to you, Dear Reader.*

The Reference Library of the Archives has been, for the last two years, the domain of Hermione Granger, whom readers of this column know as a plain, ambitious girl who has made her place in wizarding society by riding on the coattails of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

Her personal exploits have been no less scandalous! After breaking the heart of her self-styled 'best friend', Miss Granger moved on to the world-famous international Quidditch star, Viktor Krum. Unsatisfied, she abandoned Mr Krum for Ronald Weasley, the third of the so-called Golden Trio. When Miss Granger had squeezed every ounce of usefulness from the Weasley connexion, she disappeared from the social scene into her 'career', where she has exploited every possible association, including friendship with Kingsley Shacklebolt, the former Minister for Magic. Now, having reached the pinnacle of her career before the age of thirty, has the rapacious Miss Granger set her sights on larger game?

Enter Severus Snape, former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, former spy for the Light in the war against He Who Must Not Be Named, and

current most-eligible bachelor in the over-forty set of the wizarding world. The elusive Mr Snape lives now out of the public eye, but every society hostess will tell you that his name is at the top of her guest list for all society functions.

How did Dumbledore's Spy-Master come into the orbit of the dangerous man-eater, Hermione Granger? It was easier than one might think for her to lure him in, for Severus Snape is a scholar by nature, and he spends his days...yes, Dear Reader, you have guessed it!...amongst the dusty tomes in the National Wizarding Archives. This reporter has thus gone undercover behind the scenes at the Archives to question those in the know...and to observe first-hand the scandalous behaviour of the unprincipled Miss Granger in pursuit of her newly rich prize!

It is true! All true! With my own eyes I have seen Granger baiting the Dark, mysterious Snape, and sadly, I have seen him responding to her blandishments. Amongst the denizens of the Archives, their mutual attraction is common knowledge, and rumour has it that hopeful single witches all over wizarding Britain are marking the name of Severus Snape off their lists.

There are, of course, questions raised by it all, which must be answered by those whose job it is to protect society from the corrupt actions of unscrupulous persons. Why was a notoriously unreliable witch permitted to rise to a position of such authority, and who will answer for the profligate waste of a national hero and his soon to be squandered nationally-awarded fortune?

The wizarding world has the right to know!

Severus dropped the newspaper as if it were soiled and wiped his fingers with his handkerchief. What a load of codswallop! And why that Skeeter woman was even permitted to publish her tripe was beyond his understanding. Returning his handkerchief to his pocket, he turned a very stern gaze upon Miss Creevey and spoke in his most authoritative voice.

'How could you permit such a ridiculous notion to take root in your mind?' he admonished the girl. 'You work with her! Surely you know Miss Granger well enough not to believe such twaddle.'

Miss Creevey flushed miserably and looked down. 'But everyone knows Hermione fancies you,' she said in a tiny voice.

'Don't be absurd!' he barked.

Now the little Gryffindor plucked up her courage and raised her round blue eyes to his face. 'She told me so herself, Professor,' she said resolutely, forgetting and using his old title. 'She thinks you have a nice bum. And everyone in the staff room is always teasing her about you coming in and demanding to speak to her and refusing to settle for anyone else.'

'She's the bloody *Reference Librarian!*' he all but shouted, earning a *shhhh* from the embattled Miss Creevey. 'When I have a question about reference material, with whom else would I wish to speak?'

Miss Creevey looked pointedly away from him, and Severus felt his head begin to ache. What did it matter, after all? It was preposterous that Skeeter had published such blatant untruths, and he would personally speak to the publisher about that, when this was all done. And it was ... unfortunate that Miss Granger had allegedly seen fit to confide an extraneous remark to a colleague...a remark which had, apparently, been repeated until an entire Department of the Ministry had the entirely wrong idea about Severus Snape and Hermione Granger...but again, that was not the point of his visit today.

He touched the hidden pocket of his cloak, wherein a very heavy Gringotts bag rested, and was reassured. He had a task, and he had a deadline, and irritating though it all was, he *had* obtained helpful information in this verbal exchange with Sara Creevey. It was rather more obvious now who the purported 'love of his life' was, and he had a fairly clear idea how the notion had come to be taken as fact.

It wasn't important what anyone thought. What was important was that Hermione Granger, who was believed to be on holiday, had actually been kidnapped and was being held for ransom. What was important was finding the bastards responsible and punishing them...oh, and finding Miss Granger as well, of course.

'Well, never mind that,' he said in a more moderate tone, and he was rewarded by Sara Creevey looking at him again. 'I wonder if you have a list of the Archive employees? Miss Granger was going to provide one for me, but it appears it must have ... slipped her mind.'

Miss Creevey looked vaguely distressed. 'Oh, that's not like her!' she said, beginning to rummage in a drawer of the waist-high desk. 'I'll find one for you, sir!'

Pleased with the success of his lie, Severus waited patiently for the list which Miss Creevey presently placed in his hand. There were fewer than twenty names upon the list, and although his blood did not run cold at the sight of the last three listed, he was entirely unsurprised to find them there.

Nott, Stephen

Rowle, William

Selwynn, Kenneth

Death Eaters, all three, though of such a low level that only a member of the inner circle would have been aware of their involvement. Of course, Severus was helped along by the dubious pleasure of having been their former Head of House.

He placed the list on the desktop between himself and Miss Creevey. 'These three gentlemen,' he said, indicating the ones he meant with his fingertip, 'what are their jobs?'

Sara supplied the information immediately. 'They're Retrievers,' she said.

Severus evinced interest. 'What do they do, exactly?'

Sara became almost animated. 'They find books that are out of place and return them to their proper locations,' she said. 'And if someone has checked out a book and they don't return it on time, the Retrievers can fetch the item back to the Archives.' She pulled an old piece of parchment from beneath the counter and displayed it to him. 'This map shows the location of every out-of-place item registered to the Archives.'

Severus stared down at the blank parchment. 'I suppose you realise this is *not* a map?'

'Oh!' Sara said. 'I forgot!' She pulled her wand and touched the tip to the page, murmuring, '*I solemnly swear I'll keep the Archives in order!*'

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web, joining, crisscrossing, and fanning to every corner of the parchment. At the top, in green ink, no-nonsense block letters proclaimed: The Retriever's Map.

'Hermione made it,' Sara confided, her voice filled with awe. 'Isn't she *brilliant!*'

Severus contained his smirk. 'Quite,' he said, thinking to himself, *Unoriginal, of course, but a cunning application, nevertheless.* 'Miss Creevey...Sara...may I borrow the map? Just to see how it works?'

As he had calculated it might, the use of her first name flustered her. 'Of course, sir...but you'll need to know about the key-cards as well, if you want to use the map.'

Severus' admiration for the adaptation of Potters' old map of Hogwarts to the uses of the Archives deepened. Miss Granger had added another layer of magic to the map? Impressive.

'Then let's see the key-cards,' he said and followed the girl through a warded door on the far wall of the room.

They entered a workroom, crowded with shelves of books, small worktables, stacks of parchment, Spello-tape, rubber stamps, and inkpads. Sara led the way to a rack upon the wall upon which hung dozens of wooden keys.

'These are the key-cards,' she explained. 'Each one of these represents an item in the Archives which is out of place. We don't really pay any mind to them during business hours, because patrons have stacks of books and periodicals and other materials piled up as they do their research.'

She looked interrogatively at Severus, as if to make sure she wasn't going too fast for him, and he twirled his finger once, to tell her to get on with it.

'After we make the rounds and replace all the items which have been left out at the end of the day, then we come to the rack and see if there are any key-cards left. If there are, we use them to find the item so it can be returned to its proper place.'

Sara plucked a key at random from the rack and touched it to the Retriever's Map. Immediately, the map changed from the interior of the Archives to the streets of a city. At the top of the Map, the following words appeared: *The Western Wizards' Genealogy, Fifth Edition*, Wellesley Road, Croyden, London.

'So, we know this book has been checked out by the person living at that address,' Sara explained, 'and it's overdue.'

She made a *tsk* sound of disapproval and took down a different key. When she touched it to the Map, the lines reformed to once again show the interior of the Archives, and the words at the top said: *Witches' Fashionable Repository, 1809 1837*, Room 2, Table 7-E.

'This means that the bound issues of that periodical are resting now on or near that table in Room 2.'

Severus nodded, his mind working. 'What if someone took that book and hid it from you? What if it was neither on the shelf nor on the table, but hidden under a table or behind a drapery? How would you find it?'

Sara offered him the key, and he took it from her, noting the cool feel of it in his hand.

'You would go to the room indicated on the map and walk around. When you got close to the book, the key would begin to grow warmer in your hand.' She smiled happily. 'We haven't misplaced a single item since Hermione designed and implemented this system.'

Severus replaced the key-card on the rack. 'Thank you for showing me how it works,' he said soberly. 'A system of this type would be just the thing for the Hogwarts Library. I would like to explore it further, so that I may be able to explain it more fully to the Headmistress. May I look at the map for a while?'

Sara looked around the room uncomfortably, as if hoping to see someone with more authority than she had to give him permission.

'I'm sure Miss Granger wouldn't mind,' he added unscrupulously.

Sara's face cleared. 'Oh, I know she wouldn't mind *you* having a look around, sir,' she said. 'Just bring it back to me when you're finished examining it.'

Severus nodded gravely. 'You have my word,' he said, and he seated himself at one of the worktables, hoping Sara would not object that the room was only for employees.

But the uncomplicated girl left him with a sunny smile, and Severus was on his feet as the door closed. He had a bit of exploring to do before the end of the working day.

As the last of the Archive employees gathered their belongings to leave for the day, Severus Snape lifted his Disillusionment Charm and stood before the rack of key-cards. With the patience of a (Dark) saint, he took the keys and touched them, one by one, to the excellent map designed by Hermione Granger to keep up with each and every item in her charge. At last, he found what he was seeking. With a knowing smile he murmured, 'Good girl,' and slipped the key into his pocket.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 6

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??

A/N: Additional thanks to Scoffy (Sc010f), for the non-canon Latin incantations in this chapter, which was, as always, looked over by my Golden Trio: Shug (sshg316) alpha read, DeeMichelle beta read, and MagicAlly Brit-picked.



Rumour Has It

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 3

She lay in the cold dark, hands bound uncomfortably behind her back, the surface beneath her hard and even colder. Her eyes were covered by a blindfold which she had been unable to dislodge, but she could see no light about its edges. She was being held in the absolute darkness of a windowless room in the Ministry of Magic.

But worst of all, she had been drugged, and her usual ruthless command of her intellect seemed here and there ... squishy ... and for Hermione Granger, that was the worst cut of all.

Oh, how stupidly careless could one witch be? She had stayed a bit late at the office to tidy up before she went on holiday...perhaps a week of sun and sand would help to ... clear her mind...and *they* had been upon her before she knew what was happening. What was the world coming to when a woman couldn't be at ease in her own workplace?

She jerked her hands futilely against the ropes and fumed. Oh, *how* she would get serious stick from Harry and Ron about this! *You didn't have your wand up your sleeve, Hermione? Why don't you just wear a sign that says 'Please victimise me'?*

She exhaled in sharp exasperation, feeling embarrassed...almost ashamed of herself. She had been bent over her desktop, signing last minute paperwork, when a flash of magic had washed over her. She had become as rigid as a statue, falling to the floor and bruising her hip as the hard edge of *A Holidaymakers Guide to Antigua*, which she had tucked hurriedly into the pocket of her robes but not yet borrowed, dug into her flesh. The room had then been cast into darkness, and an indistinct figure had forced a burlap sack over her head. She had heard her captors speaking to one another in hushed voices...did the dimwits really think she, the witch who had hired them for their positions, would not recognise their voices?...as they levitated her body and moved her, none too expertly, through the Archives and down into one of the storage rooms, bumping her frequently and rather painfully against walls and doorways as they went.

Fuckwits.

Now, the confused part of her brain, made fuzzy by the drug they had forced upon her, wondered: Was it a promotion or *demotion* to move from dimwit to fuckwit?

Hermione shifted her position, the ropes which bound her ankles chafing against her skin. She tried to dress professionally at work, as befitted her role. She wanted to be a good example for her staff, and she wanted to disprove the talk which said that she had only got her job by being Harry Potter's friend. She had bloody well earned her place as the Head Librarian of the Research Archives! She had the education, she had paid her dues, and she had worked circles around the other people in her Department. Circles ... no, don't think about that ... dizzy ...

She was wearing her favourite navy blue suit beneath her robes, but her tights had been torn as she squirmed and struggled against her ropes, after the Full Body Bind had worn off. But nothing she had tried to free herself had served to do anything more than tighten the knots on the ropes. She had dozed fitfully, off and on, as she lay upon the stone floor, her dreams bizarre and confused because of the drug. She did not know how many times she had been dosed, but she remembered at least twice that they had come in, one with a wand and one with a potion phial. The first coward Stunned her, and the second poured the foul-tasting concoction down her throat, leaving behind the horrid taste of valerian.

Now, she desperately needed a pee. She was thirsty, and she was hungry, and she was bloody well going to curse the bollocks off those idiotic Retrievers when she got her wand back. Just see if she didn't!

And furthermore, she was going to see that they were sacked, which was even worse.

And distracting herself from her hunger, thirst, and need for the loo with extravagant, if confused, fantasies of revenge upon her kidnappers, she drifted into another dozing dream.

The sound which woke her was the squeak of a sticky hinge, followed by the thump of something relatively heavy hitting the floor...something like a body. She was fully awake in an instant, biting her lip to stifle the urge to scream invective at the person now making his stealthy way to her across the storage room floor. The kidnappers had checked on her periodically; she had heard them moving about in the room, and even sensed them staring at her. But they had not entered the storage room by way of the overhead trapdoors, so who was this?

Was she found?

In the next instant, a blaze of light washed about her, and hands were busy with the ropes at her ankles.

'Are you conscious?' a familiar voice inquired quietly, and Hermione felt all of her defences crumple in an overwhelming surge of relief.

She was no longer alone, she was safe and *saved*, and the renegade Retrievers would *pay* for how she had been treated...now she knew it for certain!

'Professor Snape,' she breathed in answer to his question, and she was overcome by an absurd desire to cry like a girl.

Strong hands massaged feeling back into her ankles, then he repeated the process by freeing and rubbing her wrists.

'Can you sit up, if I assist you?'

She murmured her assent, embarrassed by the scratchy sound of her voice forced past the aching lump in her throat. He seemed not to notice, for he put an arm beneath her and lifted her up, holding her steady against his chest as her head swam sickeningly. All of her neglected bodily needs, which had been somewhat suppressed by the

potion still in her system, made themselves distressingly known.

Even so, she revelled in the unspeakable *comfort* she felt, cradled against him so carefully, and she could not help but be aware of the undeniable strength of the arm which held her, the firmness of the torso against which she was braced, and the scent of his shaving lotion, faint but present upon his skin.

How many times had she wished to be close enough to him to inhale that scent, which she had detected many times but been unable to get close enough to truly enjoy?

'Close your eyes,' he instructed her. 'I am going to remove the blindfold.'

He did not release her to accomplish this but pulled the cloth over her head, allowing it to hang by the strands of hair in which it was tangled. Hermione cracked her eyes open, dazzled by the light, then she shut them again with a whimper.

'You'll adapt,' he promised, his lips somewhere in the vicinity of her right ear. 'While you do, tell me what your most pressing needs are. We cannot remain here for long.'

Hermione felt the frisson of possibility as it rippled down her spine, even as the warmth of his breath touched the skin of her cheek. Unable to resist, she tilted her head back until it came into contact with his shoulder, and she turned away from the light, pressing her cheek to the smooth fabric of his robes, a familiarity she would never have dared to attempt in her role as Head Librarian of the Research Archives. Now, befuddled by drugs, with her intellect in a puddle of goo where her brain used to be...in effect, as a damsel in distress...she knew she could get away with it, so she took full advantage, twisting about a bit and pressing herself against him.

'I hoped you would come,' she confided, realising it was true.

Her shoulders were grasped firmly, and she was held away from him as he said, 'Look at me, Miss Granger.'

Hermione was not averse to looking at him...she rather liked the view and didn't care what anyone else said. She cracked her eyes again and found that she had indeed adapted, just as he had said she would. She discovered that he was looking at her with a rather grim expression on his face, his black eyes calculating. Hermione tried to smile, hoping to soften his expression, and then she looked away from him. Her eyes wandered over the jumbled piles of books stacked about the walls and untidily scattered about the floor. Was this the state of the storage rooms? She would really have to do something about that!

'Miss Granger,' he said again, forcefully, and she moved her eyes back to his face, seeing that his lip was curled disdainfully.

'What have they given you?' he demanded.

Hermione blinked and tried to make her mind work, but it skittered about like a new-born colt on spindly legs. 'I ... I'm not sure,' she admitted. 'Something with a strong after-taste of valerian.' She consulted her taste buds. 'And mushrooms.'

His thin lips thinned further. 'You've been given a sedative draught mixed with an hallucinogenic, a fact which you would doubtless have worked out for yourself, had you not been given it.' He turned his face from her, his head cocked in such a way that he seemed to be listening for something. When he looked at her again a moment later, he spoke with some urgency. 'Tell me your most pressing needs.'

Hermione had no trouble with this command. 'I need to pee, and I'm thirsty. Hungry, too, but mostly thirsty.'

He took his hands from her shoulders. 'Can you remain upright?' he asked.

Hermione nodded, and he withdrew a flask of water from his pocket. She took it with a hum of thanks, and he rose to his feet. Producing his wand, he conjured a plain white curtain on a wooden frame, quite like the ones in the infirmary at Hogwarts. Then he bent and put his hands beneath her elbows.

'Stand,' he instructed.

Hermione allowed him to compel her to her feet, but her legs were shaky, and she leant upon him heavily, her heart racing with the physical effort...or was it because of the sensation of her softness conforming so naturally to the hard, angular planes of his body? 'I'm dizzy,' she explained, trying to sound more apologetic than she felt.

He motioned to the curtain. 'There's a chamber pot...can you manage?'

Though she staggered the short distance, Hermione found that she could, indeed, manage.

Almost.

'Severus?' she called, after sitting for a moment with no results.

'Yes?' He sounded curt.

Her face burned with embarrassment. 'Can I call you that?'

'Yes.' Now he sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth.

'Could you, erm, put your fingers in your ears?' she asked. 'I ... I can't ...'

A moment of silence preceded the heavy sigh. 'Yes,' he supplied. 'I am putting my fingers in my ears.' He said the words as if speaking them aloud were an effort. 'Now, make haste.'

Hermione giggled and thought, 'What he really meant was make water.' Resolutely, she told herself she had complete privacy, and her body believed her.

Her bladder much relieved, she tidied herself and stood, clinging unsteadily to the wooden frame as she crept around it.

'Thank you,' she said. This was a man who thought of *everything*.

He stood next to the lantern upon the floor, and it cast its light upwards, giving him a rather demonic aspect, but Hermione didn't care. To her, he looked like rescue and safety and ... everything she wanted.

Even if he didn't have his fingers in his ears. Damn.

He stepped forward, Vanishing the curtain and the chamber pot with a wave of his hand.

'Do you know where your wand is?' he asked her tersely, reaching out once again to steady her.

'No,' she admitted ashamedly. 'It was in the outer pocket of my handbag, in my office. I was almost ready to leave ...'

He motioned her to silence and cocked his head again, and this time, Hermione heard it too...sounds coming from behind the far wall. He placed himself between her and the wall, and another wave of dizziness stole over Hermione. She swayed on her feet.

Holding tightly to her upper arm with one hand, he produced an object from his robes which he enlarged and placed upon the floor amongst the litter of books. Hermione saw that it was an enormous atlas, from the ...

'That's not supposed to be taken from the Reference Room!' she protested weakly.

'No *time* for that now,' he said, guiding her to a kneeling position beside the book. 'Open it.'

Hermione lifted the cover of the atlas, revealing the blank first page. 'But don't you think it's time to leave now?' she asked plaintively, casting a worried look at him.

'Do you think I can levitate you up through the trap door and fight off your captors at the same time?' he snapped.

Hermione looked up at him with an expression of absolute trust. 'Yes,' she replied, surprised that he even had to ask.

A look of incredulity passed over his features, and he shook his head with a snort that might have been laughter. 'Perhaps I could,' he conceded, 'but I don't want to try it today...and you're too impaired to help me fight at the moment.'

Hermione could only nod.

The muffled noises resolved into indistinct voices, and Hermione reached for Severus' trouser leg and held on.

With his wand arm extended in the direction of the voices, he hissed, his urgency palpable, '*Now open the damn book!*'

Hermione pressed her fingertips against the gilt-edged pages and flipped three-quarters of them over, past the brightly coloured maps. 'It's open,' she whispered, and he tossed an incantation over his shoulder, scarcely taking his implacable gaze from the far wall.

'*Aperi Librum!*' he intoned, and the open book was outlined with silvery light.

At the same moment, a blue light appeared on the far wall as a hidden door shimmered into existence.

'Quickly!' he said. 'Into the book!'

Hermione saw that the open atlas page now appeared to be three-dimensional, as if its depth stretched down through the floor.

'Go!' he insisted as the door across the room burst open, and he cast a non-verbal Shield Charm.

Terrified that she would end up bound and blindfolded again, Hermione dove head and shoulders first into the book, falling through the air and landing with a thud on the floor. With her heart pounding in her ears, she scooted to one side, lost her balance as a bit of drug-induced vertigo assailed her, and fell flat on her back.

In the next moment Professor Snape was through the opening, and it was apparent that he had possessed the presence of mind to grab the lantern before he leapt in, for she could see him clearly as he landed on his feet. He pointed his wand upward and cried, '*Claude Librum!*'

The opening overhead disappeared from right to left, as if ... well, as if someone had slammed the book closed.

'Shite!' he muttered as the ceiling smacked him soundly on the top of the head, forcing him to stoop. He held the lantern aloft and looked about the extremely cramped space, then turned his annoyed gaze down to Hermione. 'What map did you choose?' he demanded crossly. 'This place looks like a broom cupboard.'

Hermione struggled to a sitting position and cradled her suddenly sweaty brow. 'I didn't choose a map...you told me to open the book.'

He knelt, placed the lantern on the floor, and produced a handkerchief from his pocket, offering it silently to her. Hermione took it gratefully and wiped her face.

'To what page was the atlas opened when I cast the spell?' he asked in a tone of thinly stretched patience.

'It was past the maps...I think it was in the index,' she said, attempting to give the handkerchief back, but he waved it off and bowed his head, his hand rising to pinch the bridge of his considerable nose.

'Of course,' he said, sarcastically. 'I have the foresight to choose an atlas of the whole damn planet in which to secret ourselves, and *you* land us in the bloody INDEX!'

Hermione knew this was entirely unfair, but instead of feeling a flash of indignation, tears flooded her eyes. Oh, she was very tired of the effects of the potion! 'I didn't know!' she cried. 'I've never heard of that spell before!'

He subsided into a sitting position, his knees practically at shoulder level in the narrow space. He cast her a sardonic sideways glance. 'Have you not?' he said, his manner at once snide and resigned. 'I am surprised to hear it. Perhaps Potter was only interested in the offensive spells in my old potions book. He took to *Sectumsempra* right away, as I recall.'

Hermione felt a hint of interest. 'You invented the spell? What was the purpose of it?'

The adult, nearly professional tone of her question, of which she had been quite proud, was ruined by an audible rumble from her stomach. She placed a hand flat on her tummy, blushing, and he produced a bar of chocolate from his pocket, placing it in her hand with no comment save the quirk of an amused eyebrow.

When she had torn open the sweets wrapper and begun to devour the Honeydukes chocolate, he rested his head against the wall and said, 'I thought it would be handy to have a spell which would permit me to disappear in an enclosed space, so I could not be trapped in a room.'

Hermione swallowed a mouthful of delicious chocolate and took a breath, feeling the sharpest of her hunger pangs resolve. Strangely enough, the chocolate seemed to clear her mind a bit, as if counteracting Dark magic, and she wondered if the potion she had been force-fed was a Dark one. Then she darted a glance at her companion from the corner of her eyes, wondering why a boy would create such a spell. Of course, Harry had shared many stories from his parents' past, including the persistent victimisation of Severus Snape by James Potter and his gang of Gryffindors.

Sadly enough, Severus had probably had many opportunities to hide out between the covers of a book as the Marauders hunted him.

'Then we'll just wait for them to go, and we'll climb out again,' she said complacently, relaxing against the wall at her back, her shoulder pressed to his upper arm.

'Oh, we'll be in here a bit longer than that,' he murmured softly, even as her head drifted to lie upon his shoulder, and she twined her arm with his, as if to hold her pillow closer.

'Why?' she inquired sleepily, but his next words banished thoughts of sleep from her mind.

'Because we won't be leaving until our reinforcements arrive, and that won't be until morning,' he said and closed his own eyes, seemingly deaf to her barrage of questions.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 6

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??

A/N: My Golden Trio each passed on this story: Shug (sshg316) alpha read, DeeMichelle beta read, and MagicAlly Brit-picked.



Rumour Has It

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 4

Hermione woke without opening her eyes. She was on holiday, wasn't she? And no one should have to get up early on holiday. Her lips curved in a tiny smile, and she exhaled a sigh of sheer laziness even as she cuddled her pillow and rolled to her side ...

'MISS GRANGER!'

Her eyes flew open as she jerked awake and climbed off of the man beside her, feeling utterly disoriented. She *wasn't* on holiday. She was stuck in the index of the *World Atlas (Thirtieth Edition)* with Severus Snape, and he looked and sounded none too pleased about it.

'If you would kindly unhand me,' he said icily, 'I must move.'

Hermione blinked at him, dismayed. 'You ... you're not going to leave me here alone?' she asked in a small voice.

He studied her for a moment, his black eyes travelling over her face. 'You seem more lucid,' he said finally. 'Do you feel differently than you did?'

She nodded once. 'Yes. The chocolate seemed to help to clear my mind, as if the potion I was given was a Dark one.'

He sneered. 'Considering its provenance, I have little doubt that Dark Arts were used in its creation,' he said. Then he disengaged his arm from her grasp and stood, though he could not hold his head up straight, for the ceiling was too low. 'I can no longer sit against the wall with my knees about my ears,' he explained, walking a few steps back and forth, as if to relieve cramped muscles. 'This place...the *index*...seems to be shaped like an elongated rectangle, though I cannot see the short walls in either direction. We are undoubtedly in the space betwixt two lines of text, and the edges of the page could be a long distance. I must sit where I can have my legs straight. *You* may suit yourself.'

Hermione watched him move, admiring the long legs under question, his words washing over her with the silken tones she found so beguiling, without actually penetrating her consciousness. She was far too engaged with her own thoughts regarding the likely appearance of those legs, sans clothing, to be at all concerned about his continuing annoyance over her landing them in the index, much less his reasons for wishing to shift positions.

'Miss Granger, are you attending to me?' he demanded, stopping to glare down at her.

'Call me Hermione,' she entreated him. 'And tell me how you found me.'

He seated himself again at a slight distance from her, his booted feet a foot away from her knees. 'It is my belief that you are still impaired,' he said grumpily. 'Your behaviour is not at all consistent with what I have come to expect from you.'

Without a moment's hesitation, Hermione crawled up to sit beside him, the two of them fitting side by side in the narrow space like two peas in a pod, arm to arm and hip to hip.

'Must you sit so close?' he demanded, sounding to her ears more than annoyed ... almost alarmed.

'I'm cold,' she said, not altogether truthfully. She liked being close to him, had been longing to be close to him for weeks...perhaps even months...and she had been given this opportunity to achieve her ambition. Who knew if such a chance would ever come her way again? It would be foolish to squander it. What's the use of being kidnapped if you can't snuggle?

He huffed but did not repudiate her, and with a happy sigh, she allowed herself to relax her posture.

'Isn't this nice?' she asked, darting a sideways glance at him from the corner of her eyes.

He sat rigidly beside her, as if doing so might reduce the square footage of contact between his body and hers, and stared straight ahead without answering her.

'So,' she continued, striving to sound light and airy, 'how did you find me?'

He shifted, and Hermione held her breath, afraid that he would stand and move away. However, he simply held his hand before her, and she reached out to take the key-card from him, allowing her fingertips to trail across his skin. The key-card was warm to the touch and became warmer still as she drew *A Holidaymakers Guide to Antigua* from her own pocket.

'I thought you might have had an opportunity to take something from a shelf before you were overcome,' he said stiffly. 'I waited until your staff went home for the day and checked the key-cards against the map. This was the only item I could not account for...it appeared to be beneath the floors.'

Hermione felt the rush of pleasure through her entire body, and she smiled tremulously at him. 'You thought that of me?' she said wonderingly. 'That ... that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.'

He glanced down at her, a faint frown between his brows. 'You've never been stupid,' he conceded.

Still aglow, Hermione disregarded the grudging nature of this encomium, even as she pocketed the warm key-card. 'May I have the map as well?' she said, and he smirked as he surrendered it.

'Not a bad knock-off of Potter's map of the castle,' he observed.

Hermione took a deep breath, unsure of how much praise she could receive from her hardest-to-please former professor without spontaneously self-combusting. She felt she should give something back, something that would make him feel as good as she felt, but she had no idea what sort of words would please him. In the end, she settled for simplicity.

'Thank you,' she said. She could feel his eyes still on her face, and she wondered why he was studying her so closely. Her hands felt slightly shaky, and her heart was still beating too quickly, as some women were purported to feel in the presence of a cinema star. Even so, her curiosity was paramount.

'But how did you know I'd been kidnapped?' she asked, daring to peek at him.

His appraising stare became enigmatic. 'Don't you know?' he inquired. 'Did the dunderheads not tell you?'

Hermione cocked her head to one side inquisitively. 'No one has told me anything,' she averred. 'I've been quite out of it, you know.'

The hand which she had lately caressed slipped inside his robes, emerging again with a creased parchment. 'Then allow me to enlighten you,' he drawled as he dropped the note into her lap.

Severus watched her as she read.

Here was a most fascinating creature, with a rats' nest of unremarkable (save for its untidiness) brown hair about her face, framing the largest and most limpid brown eyes it had ever been his misfortune to encounter. These were set above an average little nose and a rosebud of a mouth, its perfect cupid's bow of an upper lip arresting in its contrast to its fellow, a full, plump lower lip made for gentle biting...an exercise in which she engaged far too frequently for his peace of mind.

Oh, bugging Merlin, he had become aware of her as a woman.

Why? Why, after all these years, was he suddenly noticing another woman? And one so ... well frankly, so *ordinary* in comparison to the ideal he had held since he was ten years old? Had he, Severus Snape, become at this late date ... *inconstant*?

He watched as the delicious colour rose in her cheeks, spreading from the vee of her no-nonsense white office blouse up her throat, until she was blushing to the roots of her hair. As the pink diffused, miraculously, the guilt with which he had ruled himself all his adult life seemed to dissipate in equal measure. After all, had not Lily herself told him his debt was paid? Was it not true that he thought of her far less often now, and had done, ever since his recovery from his war injury?

Now she...*Hermione*...turned to him with a stricken look. 'I ... I don't understand ...'

And the man who normally prized his own cold rationality flared with emotion, suddenly filled with a righteous indignation he had not realised he felt. Glaring down his nose at her, he snarled, 'Don't. Lie. To. Me.'

'I'm not!' she cried. 'I wouldn't!'

He sneered and thrust the Rita Skeeter article at her. 'You've deliberately spread this rumour!' he thundered, not knowing why he was railing at her, but unable to stop.

Hermione took the clipping from him, and the self-conscious blush she had worn when reading of herself as the love of his life receded. In its place, a storm of fury visibly built in her. When next her eyes met his, there was no hint of softness in her gaze.

'She dared!' Hermione spat. 'Oh just see if she doesn't end up in a glass bottle for this!'

Severus found himself simultaneously enchanted...she was *magnificent* when she was enraged!...and confused. How could a full-grown woman be put in a glass bottle? Not that he was averse to the notion; he simply did not comprehend how it was to be achieved.

Hermione, seeing his look of confusion, segued from icy rage to a snort of laughter. 'Never mind,' she said, returning the clipping and the ransom note to him. 'It's a long story.'

'I have nothing pressing,' he commented, looking about them. 'I am ... at my leisure now, if you would care to tell it.'

And without further ado, as if she were relating a tale to one of her friends, Hermione told the story of Rita Skeeter, the beetle Animagus.

When she finished speaking, Severus said, 'When you are ready to take her down, let me know. I will be happy to provide back up for you.'

Her expressive face broke into a smile, her eyes warming to their previous pansy-softness, and he felt himself responding to her, even before she grasped his sleeve and blurted, 'Oh, you're very good...so kind!'

His strongest impulse was to jerk her body against his and kiss her...one he hadn't experienced in years beyond counting...but there was another voice in his mind that refused to be silenced, and because it involved self-denial, he trusted it more than the other. Turning up the volume on the nay-sayer, he realised how wrong it would be to take advantage of a female lately drugged with a Dark potion...one who, moreover, was entrusted to his care. For though she was no longer his student...those days were long past, and he was not thinking of her in that light...she was still his responsibility, and here and now were neither the place nor the time for such activities.

So he peeled her fingers from the sleeve of his coat and said, 'Don't be ridiculous. I am neither good nor kind...but I am a handy wand in a fight, and you may always call upon me in that regard.'

And her wicked glance intensified, her chin tucked into her chest, her head tilted away from him, a look of pure mischief dancing from the corner of her eye, as if she knew more about him than he knew about himself.

Gritting his teeth, Severus fisted his hands and did his best to ignore her.

Hermione couldn't tear her gaze away from his face, the chiselled planes of his cheekbones, angling from his hooked, jutting nose, the stubborn set of his chin, and his fascinating mouth, thin lips that were nevertheless oh, so exquisitely shaped. He seemed alternately furious and fully engaged, and she was confused, but not despairing. Oh no, far from it!

'Don't worry,' she said coaxingly, watching his inflexible form for signs of relaxation. 'I won't say nice things about you...I promise.'

He turned his narrowed eyes on her, and she knew intuitively that he suspected her of making fun of him. She didn't know how to reassure him on this point...not without causing him to withdraw from her again...so she resorted to diversion instead.

'How will we know when our reinforcements arrive?' she asked.

'I will hear them,' he replied. 'I, as the spell-caster, am able to hear what is taking place in the immediate vicinity of the book in which we're hidden.' His lip curled. 'For instance, your captors are now accusing one another of not watching you carefully enough and determining who will take first watch.'

She gave him a shy smile. 'It really is a brilliant spell,' she commented. 'I'm very glad you thought of using it to rescue me.'

He shrugged, seeming slightly discomfited. 'Oh, the atlas was Plan B,' he said. 'Plan A was to find you alert and to slip away, unnoticed.'

Hermione bit her lip. It wasn't as if she had *wished* to be drugged and unable to fight. But the important thing was; he had a back-up plan. This man would have a plan for every contingency.

And determined to continue engaging him in conversation, she said, 'Was it Sara who showed you how to use the key-cards?'

The expression in his eyes became speculative...some might say *dangerous*...but Hermione preferred not to think in such terms.

'Miss Creevey was good enough to share a wealth of information with me,' he said silkily. 'For instance, she said that you...how did she phrase it?...ah yes. That you admire my *bum*.'

Hermione flushed with mortification...oh, damn Sara! Couldn't she keep her mouth shut?...but Hermione could scarcely deny it, could she? So she stumbled into unfamiliar territory, going on the offensive.

'Well, what if I do? Don't *you* like my bum?'

The instant the words were out of her mouth, she realised that she was not as fully recovered from her drug dose as she had supposed. How could she have said something so appalling to him? And look at his face! He was going to say something *horrible*, and she had no one to blame but herself.

'I've no opinion of your bum, Miss Granger,' he informed her icily. 'Unlike you, I do not make free of your form when your back is turned.'

Incensed, Hermione shot to her feet, turning on the spot, trying to look over her shoulder. 'What's the matter with my bum?' she demanded hotly. 'I'm not even thirty yet! There's nothing wrong with it!'

To her consternation, he actually glanced about the small space, as if worried that someone had overheard Hermione's outburst. 'Sit *down*, Miss Granger,' he bit out, his fingers closing imperatively about her wrist.

She stared stormily down at him. 'Call me Hermione!' she demanded, knowing she was sounding shrill but not caring.

'Hermione,' he supplied promptly, his tone now conciliatory as he pulled upon her wrist.

'What's wrong with my bum?' she asked again, sounding rather more petulant.

'I'm sure it's ... fine,' he said soothingly. 'However, I have had no occasion to make a proper assessment ...'

'AS*Se*ssment?' Hermione chortled, and in her excess of merriment, she allowed him to compel her to a sitting position once again.

'Very amusing,' he muttered.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'You can be quite clever.'

He seemed somewhat uncomfortable with her comment and turned away from her, but she took hold of his coat sleeve again.

'I thought men always looked at women that way,' she said forlornly. 'Am I really that bad?'

He did not shake her hand from his sleeve, but he refused to look at her as he spoke, his voice sounding strangled. 'It is impossible to tell much about your ... form ... when you're always in robes.'

Hermione felt immediately more cheerful. 'Well I can remedy that now,' she said, releasing him and twisting to remove the garment.

'Not now,' he said, grabbing her wrist again, and Hermione desisted. He was looking rather harassed. 'You're already chilled,' he pointed out reasonably. 'Some other time, perhaps...but for now, we should try to sleep. It's late, and we'll want to be fresh when our reinforcements arrive.'

Hermione studied his face, wishing she could tell more about what he was thinking or feeling. 'Do you promise?' she asked.

A smile, possibly less than sincere in nature, touched his lips. 'Indeed,' he said, and she had to be content.

And truly, it got better after that, because he stretched out flat on his back, with only his arm beneath his head for a pillow, and he made no objection when she curled up beside him, twining her arms about his as she cuddled close.

She slept beside him as if they were not hiding in the index of an atlas, eluding detection by armed and dangerous adversaries...she slept, in fact, as if she had nothing to fear because of *him*. What had she said to him? *I hoped you would come*

He sneered at the ceiling of their ridiculously small hiding place. She had developed some sort of inane fantasy around him...or around some fantastical *version* of him which was really not like him at all...and she was behaving based upon her fantasy, rather than on the unpleasant reality of the unsavoury git he really was. No gentleman would act upon such encouragement, regardless of the provocation provided by enticing eyes and inviting lips...and say what you might about him, Severus Snape had learned how a gentleman was supposed to behave, regardless of the way he had been raised and the company he had kept.

He turned his head slightly, and the tangle of her hair was just inches from his face...close enough for him to have a breath of its fragrance, even if he could not avail himself

of the implied invitation of her manner. What was she on about, demanding his evaluation of her bottom...would her next question have been his thoughts on her breasts? For that part of her body was not as ill-defined by her clothing ...

Closing his eyes, he stretched his neck and inhaled the scent of the preparation she used to tame her mane, smiling faintly to himself as he remembered the lock of her hair sent to him by her kidnappers...the lock he had *not* handed over to her with the ransom note, but had kept hidden in the inner coat pocket which just happened to be beneath his heart.

And for a while, he was lost in a pleasant, dozing reverie, wherein Hermione's welcoming eyes and smiling lips figured prominently.

He was instantly alert when the smoke slithered its way into the book and made itself known in their hiding place. Severus knew what action would be necessary for them to take, and though he dreaded it, there was no other option available. He dared not try to wait it out, for if the atlas were to burn, they would perish with it.

He sat up, and Hermione stirred.

'Wake up,' he said. 'We have to go now.'

She struggled to a sitting position, and he produced another chocolate bar, holding it out to her.

'Eat this as quickly as you can,' he commanded. 'We may have to fight our way out, and you must be clear-headed.'

She took the chocolate and stripped the wrapper away without comment, beginning to ingest the Dark magic-palliative. He studied her and was satisfied with what he saw. Standing, he withdrew his pocket watch and checked the time. It was six o'clock; the kidnappers had not only failed to receive their midnight ransom money, but they had also misplaced their hostage. They were trying to force their quarry into the open, and they would succeed in doing so...Severus could only hope it would be very much to their detriment.

'How many of them are there?' he asked her.

Hermione considered as she chewed, her eyes narrowing. 'Three voices I recognised and at least one I didn't know...I believe he was using a distortion spell to disguise himself.' She stuffed the torn wrapper into her pocket. 'I smell smoke,' she added, her manner rock-steady. 'Are we going to escape?'

His earlier, rather mawkish thoughts about her rushed away in the face of the capable, straightforward woman before him. He pulled his second wand from its hiding place and put it into her hand.

'Yes,' he said, watching her face for any sign of fear or reluctance.

She raised the wand and performed a quick series of simple spells to test her understanding of her weapon. *Lumos* gave way to *Aguamenti*, and the fount of water had scarcely splashed at his feet before *Orchidious* produced a bouquet. She dropped the flowers without a glance.

'What's Plan C?' she asked, a soldier receiving her orders.

'It is being formulated, even as we speak.'

Her brown eyes glowed. 'I'm ready,' she said.

Filled with a sudden violent emotion for which he had no name, Severus circled her waist with one arm and pressed a hard kiss to her lips.

'You are *extraordinary*,' he said, and with a non-verbal thrust of his wand, the book opened, and they were assailed by billowing smoke and leaping flames.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 6

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??

A/N: My Golden Trio each passed on this story: Shug (sshg316) alpha read, DeeMichelle beta read, and MagicAlly Brit-picked.



Rumour Has It

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 5

Hermione assumed her duelling stance automatically, her lips still burning from the hard kiss she had received from the man standing beside her. His body seemed to coil in upon itself, like a well-oiled spring...or like a serpent, preparing to strike. For herself, her entire being *thrummed* with screaming nerve endings...she had never felt so alive before.

The ground beneath their feet began to move up, like a lift climbing to its next stop, and she steeled herself for battle, feeling able to confront...and defeat...any challenge which awaited her. Good God, Severus Snape stood at her shoulder, prepared to fight with her. How could anyone or anything defeat them?

The fire itself, of course, could not hurt them, but inhaling the smoke in an enclosed space could be fatal. Their only option was to come out of hiding and deal with the consequences, whatever those might be. Hermione was not troubled by the notion of the kidnappers lying in wait to ambush them. Regardless of their number, she was filled with a heady conviction that she could battle them to a standstill on her own. After all, in a world where Severus Snape, the Dark wizard of her wildest dreams, could call her 'extraordinary' and kiss her so savagely, there wasn't *anything* she could not do. She *would* fight her way through at his side, for nothing would keep her from finding out what next miracle the universe held in store for her.

As if reading her crazily racing thoughts, Severus snapped, 'FOCUS!'

Hermione gripped her wand more tightly, and in the next instant, Severus leapt the remaining distance to the storage room, and the shouts of their adversaries filled Hermione's ears. Flashes of light pierced the smoky gloom, and as Hermione stepped out of the atlas, Severus cast a Shield Charm of such power that she was forced back a step.

Spinning to her right, she cast a Full Body Bind at the hulking figure advancing from that direction, and she could not contain her shout of vindication as Kenny Selwynn fell on his face, unmoving. From the corner of her eye she saw a flash of red light, and she pirouetted as she had learned as a little girl in ballet, her wand arm sweeping up with a speed and grace she had never before possessed. The unfriendly Stunning Spell flew past her face, impacting a pile of books at her back, and she retaliated in kind, her spell delivered with such power that Will Rowle, attempting to evade her, took the Stunner in his shoulder and hit the wall head-first, knocking himself silly.

Through the mere seconds it took for these clashes to take place, Hermione was constantly aware of the terrifying, deadly wand work taking place at her back. The flashes of green and the dreadful rushing sound which accompanied those flashes were being dodged and parried by a duellist of such skill and cunning that the two who confronted him, with combined efforts, were unable to break through his guard.

Now she pivoted and raised her wand, and as she did, she saw that there were not a mere two, but three armed attackers arrayed across the storage room floor. As she joined the fray, the one furthest from her broke from his fellows and lumbered away, dodging the bonfire of books, to reach the space beneath the trap door.

His defection seemed to unnerve the remaining combatants. A second attacker turned to run, while the sole remaining figure cast one last spurt of deadly green light accompanied by the sound of the rushing wind. Hermione could only watch in horrified silence as Severus Snape leapt aside and brought his opponent down with a Stunner directly to the face. The man, whom Hermione recognised as Stephen Nott, fell like a rag doll.

A wash of light poured into the storage room from the now open trap door, and the flames rushed for the new supply of oxygen, smoke quickly obscuring the burly figure of the fleeing kidnapper, closely followed by his confederate. Hermione watched as Severus launched himself in pursuit, his lips peeled back from his teeth in a fierce snarl. Hermione started after him, but he shouted at her without slowing down.

'Immobilise them!'

Hermione whirled around. '*Incarcerous!*' she cried, and ropes flew from her wand to bind Stephen Nott, who lay unmoving on the floor. Hardening her heart, Hermione turned from him and repeated the process on Will Rowle and Kenny Selwynn. These men had betrayed their positions as employees of the Ministry, betrayed their duties as Retrievers, kidnapped her, interrupted her holiday, and attempted to extort gold from Severus. Worst of all, they had deliberately started a fire to flush her and Severus from hiding without even considering how their actions would *endanger or destroy books!*

Frankly, Azkaban would be too good for them.

She turned her back upon them and with a terrible pang, she let loose a great gout of water to extinguish the fire the fools had set. When the flaming books had died to a smoky, sodden ruin, she turned from the devastation and sprinted after Severus.

Severus propelled himself through the trap door, soaring into the air as the Dark Lord had taught him to do so many years before. Hector Bulstrode screamed when he saw the flying wizard, and he cried, '*Petrificus...*'

Severus cursed Bulstrode with an almost languid wave of his hand, and the fool fell, downed by the very spell he had tried to cast.

Now Severus flew past him, continuing in the direction Bulstrode had fled, knowing he was now on the trail of the 'brains' behind the whole operation. He Disillusioned himself as he spied his prey, finding that he was filled with a white hot rage beyond anything he had ever felt before. Many fools had tried to do him harm through the years, though none had dared since the war ended. He cared nothing for that; he had always been able to take care of himself. No, his ire was roused for a different reason altogether, and though he had not explored all of the ramifications of his new knowledge, he was entirely prepared to act upon it.

No one, but *no one* would threaten Hermione Granger or put her in danger. Not while he lived.

Swooping past his quarry, he lit upon the ground and with a regal sweep of his wand, lifted the Disillusionment Charm.

Horace Slughorn screamed and skidded to a stop, clutching his chest. 'Se-Severus!' he bleated, and Severus raised his wand until it was pointed between the old man's eyes.

'Give me one reason why I should not drop you where you stand,' he said icily.

Slughorn pulled a silken handkerchief from the pocket of his purple velvet coat and wiped his streaming face, wet with sweat and smudged with soot. 'Be reasonable!' he pleaded, his small eyes darting about from side to side, sliding over Severus without once meeting his eyes. 'All we wanted was a bit of gold!'

'Reasonable?' Severus said, his voice low-pitched. 'I find exploding owls unreasonable, Horace. Threatening the life of an innocent girl? *Unreasonable.*' The wand pressed forward, touching the skin between Slughorn's brows. 'Interrupting my daily routine? *Completely unreasonable.*'

Slughorn jerked back from the wand tip, and Severus advanced upon him, until the old man stood with his back to the wall, the younger man towering over him, continuing his tirade.

'You disregarded your responsibilities as an educator and led the most dim-witted of your former students into the criminality they never achieved as small-time Death Eaters. Congratulations, Professor Slughorn, your protégées have progressed from respectable civil service to kidnapping and extortion.' He smiled a ghastly smile. 'And they never would have made it without your tutelage.'

'Severus!' Slughorn wheedled. 'You know I would never have permitted them to hurt her. The war...the war didn't leave me well off, as it did you. I wasn't recognised for my efforts.'

Severus' snort of derision did not bode well for the success of Slughorn's explanations. 'What efforts were those, *Professor Slughorn?*' he demanded.

'You know I always came down on the side of right!' Slughorn cried indignantly.

Severus sneered in his face. 'You mean the *right side*...the *winning side*.'

Slughorn bristled. 'Winning? What did I ever win? I just needed the money!'

Severus shook his head. 'Then why didn't you ransom her to Potter? He's far richer than I will ever be!'

'Because everyone's afraid of Harry!' Slughorn cried. 'And everyone knows that ever since you were wounded in the war, you're just a shadow of your former self!'

A slow, sardonic smirk touched Severus' face as he swept a theatrical bow, his eyes and his wand tip never wavering from his prisoner. 'And as you can attest, Horace, everyone was right,' he said, then stepped back from him, disgusted to be too near. 'Did it ever occur to you to just ask for the money?' he asked wearily.

Slughorn's face crumpled. 'I'm just a proud old fool!'

Severus felt a stab of pity which left a foul taste in his mouth. 'Fool indeed, you vacillating, fortune-hunting coward. Money will be the least of your concerns in Azkaban.'

Horace Slughorn burst into ragged sobs, and Severus took another step back. From down the corridor came the sound of feet upon the stone, and a familiar voice called out.

'Severus!'

He glanced at Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had a small army of Aurors in tow, and raised one eyebrow interrogatively. 'Well, Kingsley?' he said.

The former Minister for Magic waved a lavender paper airplane memo in Severus' general direction. 'What's this about kidnappers and ransoms and exploding owls?' Shacklebolt demanded. He turned his gaze on Slughorn. 'And what have you done to the old fellow?'

Just then, Severus heard what must have been the laboured breathing of a running girl, and though there was a fierce gladness in seeing her free and safe and rushing to him with open arms, it was tinged with sadness that she would find her malefactor to be an old, trusted teacher.

Her arms closed about him convulsively, her face muffled against his coat as she murmured, 'You're safe.' He held her with one arm, the other occupied with covering the blubbing old fraud. She touched the fingertips of one hand to his cheek, and he glanced down at her.

'Why is *he* here?' she asked, nodding towards Slughorn.

Severus pivoted to face Shacklebolt, pulling Hermione about with him. 'This, Kingsley, is your kidnap victim,' he drawled, tightening his arm about Hermione's shoulders in a proprietary way. 'And that,' he continued with a jerk of the head towards Slughorn, 'is her kidnapper.'

Hermione gasped and cried out, as Severus continued to speak.

'You will find his compatriots betwixt here and a storage room, if you continue down this corridor,' he said.

Hermione nodded emphatically. 'Just follow the smoke,' she added helpfully.

Two of the Magical Law Enforcement officers stepped forward and took Slughorn by the arms, while three of their fellows followed the direction of Hermione's pointing finger.

Shacklebolt crossed his arms over his chest and inquired, 'And the ransom?'

Severus sheathed his wand and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a heavy Gringott's bag. 'Safe and sound,' he said, and Shacklebolt burst into laughter.

'Well what did you need me for?' he demanded.

'Rubbish collection,' Severus replied serenely. 'You cannot expect us to stay and do everything. Miss Granger has already been delayed on her holiday.'

'But...!' Hermione began...but Severus continued to speak.

'Considering recent events, I feel it would be unwise for her to travel unescorted. Therefore, I will provide personal security for her.' He looked down into Hermione's face, and informed her, 'Antigua awaits.'

Hermione began to giggle, and Severus stepped up to Kingsley, passing him the ransom note and the lock of hair. 'I'll be wanting those back at some point,' he said, sotto voce.

Kingsley tucked the evidence away and cast a knowing look at Severus and Hermione. 'Just as you say, Mr Snape, sir...will there be anything else?'

'Not presently.' Severus shot Shacklebolt a sharp look beneath his brows. 'I won't keep you any further. Carry on.'

Kingsley knew when he had been dismissed, and he needed no assistance to interpret the look which then passed between the librarian and the spy. He turned away, giving them their privacy, marvelling to himself that for once, Rita Skeeter had got *something* right.

A/N: Stay tuned for the epilogue!

Epilogue

Severus Snape receives a ransom note. The only problem is, he isn't entirely sure to whom it refers ... the love of his life??

A/N: My Golden Trio each passed on this story: Shug (sshg316) alpha read, DeeMichelle beta read, and MagicAlly Brit-picked. Thanks to SubHub for lending his "holiday" shirt to Severus.



Rumour Has It

By Subversa & SubHub

Epilogue

Hermione walked across the floor of the large hotel room and opened the French doors onto the terrace, taking a full breath of Caribbean air as she drank in the dazzling white sand and turquoise water.

'Will that be all, Miss?'

She turned to the dark-skinned young man who had carried her bags into the room. 'Yes, thank you,' she said, reaching into her jeans pocket for the East Caribbean currency she had tucked there.

'No worries,' the bellman said. 'The gentleman took care of it.'

And those simple words sent a frisson of anticipation trembling through her like an earthquake, radiating shockwaves to every nerve ending, leaving her with her arms wrapped about her torso, a silly smile upon her face.

They had rounded up her belongings, a simple *'Accio!'* sufficing to produce her handbag and her own wand, and without further ado, Severus Snape had escorted her to her flat in a squat brick building on a dingy street, four streets away from the Ministry for Magic.

He had looked so alien standing in the middle of her cramped sitting room, a place where she had frequently thought of him, but had never thought to see him. 'What do you need to do before you can depart?' he asked, obviously formulating Plan A for their Escape to Antigua.

Hermione felt grubby and bedraggled and decidedly unfeminine in the rumpled, torn clothes she had been wearing for two days. 'I'd like a shower,' she said, 'then I've just got to pack my toiletries, and I'll be ready.'

She touched his hand, and his fingers closed about hers, strong and sure. She shivered with pleasure at the gesture. 'Are you hungry?' she asked him. 'Would you prefer to have something to eat, first?'

'Tea and toast will do, until I dine with you in Antigua,' he said, and the words held such promise...posed so many questions of what/se they might do in Antigua...that warmth filled her chest.

She felt the unreality of the entire situation, and unsure of what else to do, she started forward to put the kettle on, but he stopped her with a word.

'No, I don't mean for you to feed me,' he said. 'I'll go home, shower, drink tea, and pack my things, while you do the same.'

Wait! He was leaving? Without thought, she reached for him, and he accepted her readily into his arms, as if already she had a rightful place there.

'I don't want you to go,' she informed his coat, her arms twined about his narrow waist.

He tilted her chin with an imperious hand. 'I find it difficult to understand you when you speak into my clothing,' he informed her.

Her lips trembled. She knew her reaction was ridiculous, but the undeniable trauma of the last forty-eight hours weighed upon her. 'Please don't go.'

A faint frown touched his forehead. 'Are you afraid to be here alone?' he asked, his fathomless eyes searching hers.

She nodded her head, although she wondered if it were true. Was she afraid to be alone, or was she afraid he would leave and not return?

He glanced at the old carriage clock on the mantel over her tiny fireplace. 'Before I leave I will place wards on the doors and windows that only I can remove, and then I will return in exactly sixty minutes,' he said, with such absolute certainty that she felt her panic calming. 'Can you accept those terms?'

Hermione inhaled deeply, allowing the resolution of his manner to steady her. He only wanted to leave so he could duplicate her preparations for himself...so they could depart that much sooner for Antigua.

'Yes,' she said with a slightly damp smile. 'Yes, thank you.'

She had been surprised when he returned, precisely one hour later, with no visible luggage, and he had been equally surprised by her two bags.

'My reservations are...were...at a Muggle resort,' she explained. 'They tend to be quite suspicious of travellers who arrive with no luggage.'

He quirked an eyebrow. 'Unlike you, I have not been planning a holiday in the Caribbean, so I have no special holiday gear. I will procure what I need when we arrive.' His gaze warmed perceptibly as they surveyed her snugly fitting jeans, topped by a tight pink tee-shirt. 'Until then,' he continued, his voice as warm as the approving expression in his eyes, 'your excess of baggage will disguise my lack thereof.'

Hermione studied his appearance with the same frank appreciation he had shown her. He was showered and freshly shaved, dressed in an unremarkable black suit, but ... she was *riveted* by the open collar of his customary white shirt, fascinated by the notch of his collarbone above a smattering of wiry black chest hair. Her fingers itched to explore the dip of the clavicle, sliding down to test the texture of the alluring peek of body hair ...

'Hermione?'

She flushed, forcing her eyes back to his face. 'I've never seen you without a tie,' she managed.

His eyes told her that he knew precisely the sort of thoughts she had been having. But all he said was, 'It's all a part of blending in with the holiday environment.'

Hermione's mind darted wildly to what other concessions he might make to the holiday environment. Would he wear a silly print shirt, a floppy straw hat, and flip-flops? Would he wear a swim suit? Would he splash with her in the surf? Oh, the limitless possibilities!

Her chin dipped, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing...if a bit hysterically...at her over-excited imaginings. She had to stop this. She had, after all, come to a resolution in the shower, and it was now or never.

'Severus,' she said tentatively, fixating on one of his shirt buttons.

'Yes, Hermione?'

She cleared her throat, and with the air of a girl reciting a speech she had got by heart, striving to sound bright and capable, she said, 'You don't have to go with me on holiday.' She dragged in a breath and forced herself to meet his eyes.

One of his coal black eyebrows quirked up. 'Of course I don't,' he agreed equably.

Her heart sank. Oh, she knew it was the right thing to do...the proper thing to say...but she didn't want him to *agree* with her! Dismayed, she swallowed. 'I'm perfectly able to look after myself.'

He regarded her expressionlessly. 'Undoubtedly,' he replied.

She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. She would *not* cry! 'So, we're agreed?' she said.

'Certainly.' He reached for the larger bag.

'Wait!' she squeaked.

He stood straight again, a resigned expression on his face. 'What now?' he asked.

'You're coming with me?'

'Yes,' he answered patiently.

Overcome with combined relief and delight, she launched herself at him, and he caught her with commendable aplomb, considering the fact that both her *arm* and her legs were wrapped about him. Her face pressed to the side of his neck, which she kissed.

He turned his face into her hair, and he spoke quietly into her ear. 'Unless you'd rather I didn't.'

Hermione allowed herself to slide down his body until her toes touched the floor again, though her arms were still clasped about his neck. 'I'd be sad if you didn't come,' she admitted, and he set her aside.

'Then we'd best get on with it,' he said.

'Well *I'm* ready to go,' she told him with renewed cheerfulness, shouldering one bag and reaching for a second.

But his sharp gaze had detected a carrier bag from a London shop, abandoned on an armchair amongst a litter of books, unopened junk post, and a welter of socks from the wash she had yet to match and put away. From the carrier bag, a scarlet scrap of fabric protruded.

'What's this?' he said, and although Hermione lunged for it, he was quicker than she was, and he held aloft a skimpy swimsuit for appraisal. 'Fascinating,' he commented after studying it for what seemed an interminable time, during which Hermione's cheeks flamed the colour of the swimsuit under review. 'It appears that a significant portion of this garment is ... missing.'

Hermione fiddled with the strap of her handbag. 'I decided not to bring it,' she said. 'I'm taking a different one ... or two.'

'I see no point in limiting your options,' he said, and lifting the larger of her bags, he slipped the swimsuit into his pocket.

The sunlight sparkled on the water, and Hermione stared out to the horizon as she replayed the morning's events in her mind. Then she heard the sound of her travelling companion as he unlocked the door and entered the room they were to share, and she hurried in from the terrace. She passed a round table with two matching chairs, situated just inside the veranda doors, the enormous bed with its tropical print counterpane, and pulled up abruptly two feet from where he stood with two sizable carrier bags at his feet, slipping the room key into his trousers.

Hermione felt suddenly shy, standing with him in this hotel room with the bed standing against the wall like an accusation of ... indecency. How well did they know one another, after all? What had made her think this was a good idea?

'Did you ... did you find everything you need?' she asked, hearing the stilted tone of her voice but unable to correct for it.

Severus did not answer her question but closed the space between them in one long stride and pulled her against him, bending his head to capture her lips with his.

Hermione's pulse quickened at the unfamiliar ... and *intoxicating* ... pressure of his mouth on hers, and the well-ordered thoughts which had framed her plans for the day dissolved and blew away like dandelion fluff.

Hermione began by feeling awkward, one hand pressed to his chest as if to push him away and the other awkwardly trapped between them, somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach. But her unease slipped away from her with the dribs and drabs of her reasoning mind, the longer he held her to him, his lips moving against hers, as if acquainting himself with new and important research data.

When he released her and turned to retrieve the bags he had brought from the lobby shops, Hermione sagged a bit against the wall, thankful for its support. Her knees felt like jelly, and her brain refused to accommodate her wish to work out why he had stopped kissing her. Blinking owlishly, she opened her mouth to ask a coherent question, but he was walking away from her, unbuttoning his coat, which he disposed carefully on the back of a chair before seating himself, crossing one long leg over the other.

'Come here,' he said, extending a hand to her, and she crossed to him with alacrity, placing her hand in his. But rather than pulling her down onto his lap, he turned her.

'Why...' she began, but he cut across her.

'Would you fetch a pillow from the cupboard?' he asked her.

Fetch a pillow? Did he think she was a house-elf? But it was a benign request, so she walked away from him to the cupboard, feeling his eyes upon her back, and stretched on her tip-toes to reach for the requested item. The confusion visited upon her by the heated kiss they had shared began to leach away as she walked back to him with the pillow.

'Thank you, Hermione,' he said, inclining his head, almost as if to hide his eyes from her. 'Do you suppose there are extra blankets in the lower dresser drawer? I believe the desk clerk said there would be.'

Hermione put her hands on her hips. 'Why would anyone need a blanket when it's so warm?' she asked suspiciously.

'If it wouldn't be too much trouble,' he said smoothly.

Huffing, she spun away from him again and walked to the dresser, bending low to the bottom drawer, all the while feeling his eyes upon her, as if he were staring at ...

She marched back to him and hurled the blanket. 'You're eyeing me up!' she accused.

He grasped her wrist and tugged, and she landed awkwardly across his legs. 'How am I to make an assessment of your bum without eyeing you up, pray tell?' he asked, his manner at once languid and disquietingly intent.

Disturbed and challenged, Hermione struggled to rise, but he constrained her with a hand upon her hip, using the other hand to help her sit straighter upon his knee. 'I prefer the word *appraisal*,' she said, tossing her hair a bit. There, that felt good! Flirtatious and *girly*. 'It contains *praise*.'

He watched her with unguarded admiration. 'And I prefer the word *assessment*,' he responded, the hand at her hip tightening slightly in emphasis, 'because it contains *sass*.'

Emboldened by his manner, she kissed him this time, her lips soft upon his, until a knock at the door made her jerk away from him guiltily. He watched her with half-lidded eyes, a smouldering quality in their ebony depths. 'That will be our brunch,' he said. 'Shall I send them away again?'

Fully aware of her empty stomach, Hermione scrambled to her feet. 'I'm sure we need to eat,' she said, self-consciously adjusting her tee-shirt.

'That is ... unfortunately true,' he agreed, making no effort to rise. 'Perhaps you could open the door?'

He neither hid nor drew attention to his physical reaction to her presence in his lap, but Hermione had been ... aware of it, as she kissed him. Perhaps he needed a moment to ... collect himself. She nodded her acquiescence and hurried to admit the server with the tray of delicious aromas.

Brunch upon the terrace was leisurely and strangely exotic. Hermione found conversation with him easy. At the Archives, she had always spoken with him about his research, and he had been perfectly civil in his responses...but now she dared to broach more personal topics, and she found him receptive. Ice in their glasses melted in the warmth of the late morning sun while they sat beneath the covered part of the terrace, eating and talking, and when their hunger and a part of their curiosity had been satisfied, they drowsed on the loungers, their recent lack of sleep catching up with them.

Hermione awoke from her doze as the sun reached its zenith, making the transition from morning to afternoon. She stretched lazily in the warmth, absorbing the sight of her companion as he slept on his chaise ... within arm's reach of her unruly hands. These she clasped determinedly in her lap as she allowed herself to eye him up properly.

He seemed younger, in repose, his mouth relaxed, the lines of strain he had worn all the years she had known him eased with the forgetfulness of sleep. His inky black hair was lightly ruffled by the breeze, and she was tempted to smooth it back from his forehead. He was not beautiful; there was very little to recommend Severus Snape's face to the uninformed eye. But Hermione's blood was stirred by him, by the complexity of his personality and the undoubted courage with which he had lived his life, and in his hawkish countenance, she saw everything she wanted in her wizard.

As if feeling the force of her scrutiny, his eyes fluttered open, irises so dark they were all but indistinguishable from his pupils, and Hermione was made breathless by the unspoken intensity of his gaze. A welcoming smile touched his face, less a curving of his lips than a crinkling at the corners of his eyes, and then he reached that small distance between their respective chairs, and his fingers closed loosely about her wrist.

'Are you glad to be here?' he asked her, a heart-rending, tentative tone in the voice she had ever and always known to be as firm as the earth beneath her feet.

'Oh, yes,' she assured him warmly, her hand turning in his so that her fingertips stroked the back of his hand, at which provocation it seemed to her that sparks flew from his eyes.

His eyelids fell to half-mast, and she could feel the path his gaze travelled, from her eyes, to her lips, to her throat, to her breasts, to her hips, down her legs to her bare feet...and then he was looking into her eyes.

'Then I am ... *entirely* at your disposal,' he purred, and Hermione was assailed with a trio of sensations: the swooping of her tummy, gooseflesh pebbling the surface of her skin, up to and including her suddenly aching nipples, and a heavy warmth which settled in the area of her pelvis.

He leaned toward her, raising her hand to his thin, cool lips. 'How would you care to spend your first day in paradise?' he asked.

Hermione was flushed with conflicting emotions, and once again, the spectre of the large, empty bed in the next room loomed in her mind. Did he mean ... did he want ...?

She swallowed, wondering what he was thinking, searching his face for some hint of his thoughts. After a moment, he relinquished the hand he had kissed and sat back again, allowing his eyes to close as he lifted his pale face to the sun.

'Come, you don't mean to tell me that Hermione Granger planned a holiday without drawing up an extensive itinerary?'

He did not open his eyes, but Hermione felt sure that she detected a faint smirk about his mouth.

'Of course I did!' she cried, pulling a folded parchment from the pocket of her jeans. 'I didn't bring the schedule for day one, since I spent it in the Archives storage room, but I have the day two plan, right here!'

The speed with which he plucked the parchment from her fingers was faintly daunting. She attempted to take it back from him, somewhat fearful of his mockery, but he gave her no opportunity. Foiled, she stood and paced to the veranda railing, staring somewhat unhappily out to sea. She heard his movement, then he was behind her as he said, 'We can easily make the boat tour at one.'

She turned to him, a smile touching her lips. 'You'll come with me?'

He touched her cheek with a careless flick of his fingers before turning away. 'Indeed.'

Severus summoned his nerve and escaped into the bathroom with the carrier bag of newly procured holiday gear. In deference to the weather, he donned the lightweight trousers, which were a light shade the tag proclaimed as 'khaki'. The shirt was, to his mind, a huge concession to both the location and the occasion...and, at the same time, a Snapely sartorial coup. The shop had demonstrated that men's holiday fashions called for ridiculously coloured shirts in garish, flowered prints. Amongst the crimsons, magentas, and chartreuses, he had discovered a black shirt adorned with tropical flowers in rust and cream. He was inordinately proud of his find. With the judicious use of his wand, he adjusted the garment to a perfect fit, and swept out into the main room, coming upon Hermione just as she slipped her feet into frivolous pink sandals.

Her legs were bare and quite pale, but slender, shapely, and lovely. The white sundress she wore fell only to mid-thigh, and it was with an effort of will that he forced his eyes up to her face. Her hair had been plaited down her back, and on her head she wore a large straw hat.

'Fetching,' he murmured, and she uttered a small giggle as she placed dark glasses upon her nose.

'Do you have sunglasses?' she asked, pausing with her hand upon the door.

He did not answer, but pulled the 'Ray Bans' most strongly recommended by the shop clerk from his shirt pocket and placed them on his face.

'Fetching,' she said, smiling sweetly.

Merlin but he wanted to kiss her...and she seemed fully receptive to his kisses, going so far as initiating some of her own. She had even seemed to be disappointed to be interrupted by the room service waiter. Yet she had been reluctant, after dozing with him in the sun, to continue from the point of interruption ...

'Shall we go?' he asked, striving to mask his impatience to further explore her charms.

'Of course,' she agreed, walking out the door.

He paused to ascertain that the lock was engaged, taking the opportunity to admire the sway of her hips as she moved down the corridor. The bum assessment was progressing nicely, to be sure, and he had every hope of furthering his studies in that area.

After all, the itinerary offered sunbathing after the boat tour...there was *much* to anticipate.

Being with her out on the boat tour was a surprisingly pleasant hour. If he had been asked to make a conjecture, he would have guessed that Hermione would pepper the tour conductor with questions to show off the knowledge she had gained from her research. The reality proved to be, by his lights, far more interesting. She stayed by his side, largely ignoring the American tourists, and somewhat shyly engaged him in conversation. He found her alternation between flirtatiousness and shyness to be intriguing in the extreme, and he made a game of drawing her out, alternating between reserve and playfulness of his own, to see what worked best.

By the end of the short boat trip, she seemed fully at ease with him, achieving a level of comfort unprovoked by Slughorn's hallucinogenic potion, and he was gratified. Perhaps that daft assistant of hers had the right of it after all. Perhaps he honestly had a woman...an intelligent, desirable witch...interested in him as a ... romantic partner? No, that seemed unlikely. But as a bed partner? That was within the realm of possibility. Even middle-aged ex-Death Eaters occasionally got lucky in that regard.

In the hotel room again, he said, 'Would you prefer the bathroom or the bedroom to change into your swimsuit?'

Hermione lifted a small bag...cosmetics, perhaps?...from her larger bag. 'The bathroom, I think,' she said.

She moved toward the bathroom door, and Severus intercepted her. 'I ... picked up something for you in the shop this morning,' he said, hoping she would not be offended. 'I would be pleased if you wore it...unless you find it not to your taste.' He proffered a very small bag emblazoned with the logo of the lobby shop.

He could see the hesitancy in her expression as she accepted the bag, and her warm brown eyes searched his face. 'You bought clothing for me?' she asked.

He gave a self-deprecating shrug. 'Just a trifle,' he said. 'An impulse buy, as they say. If you don't care for it, don't give it another thought.'

And with a murmur of thanks, she disappeared into the loo.

Hermione stared at her reflection, her mind awl. He had chosen for her a two-piece suit...a bikini, really, though by modern standards, it scarcely merited the name...in matte black, with a halter top and bottoms which fully covered her derriere and began no more than an inch below her navel. Included in the bag was a gorgeous sarong, a mad coil of turquoise and fuchsia and crimson and tangerine, swirled about with and bordered by black. It was far less daring than the suit he had stuffed in his coat pocket, which was a one-shouldered affair with the belly and back bared, only a thin strip of fabric attaching the top to the bottom. Severus' choice scarcely even necessitated the painful bikini wax she had endured at Saxy Wax in Diagon Alley...had it only been three days before?

She shook her head and took up a lipstick to colour her mouth. He *seemed* interested in her...interested in the way she *wanted* him to be, she thought...but what did this suit say about his thoughts and feelings on the matter? Did it say he didn't think she had the figure to wear the crimson suit, which would show far more of her body than the one he had chosen for her?

She put down the lipstick and smoothed the strands of hair which had escaped her plait. Arms raised, her torso looked *good*...better than usual...and she turned to admire the graceful silhouette she presented. The top of the suit was structured in such a way that her breasts, slightly larger than average, were well supported and subtly shaped. Had he known it would flatter her?

What did it mean? Did he desire her?

'Hermione?'

His voice came to her from just outside the door.

'If you wanted to visit the beach before the sun sets ...' he said, a hint of teasing in his tone.

She sighed and turned from the mirror. Taking a deep breath, she went out to him.

Though his manner remained as it ever was, calm and impassive, Severus found it difficult to tear his eyes away from the sight of Hermione in the swimsuit he had given her. Her body was beautiful, curvaceous and womanly, and he hungered to caress...to *possess*...every centimetre of exposed flesh.

Other holidaymakers peopled the beach, and Severus was aware of the appreciative glances Hermione drew from the men they passed as they chose their resting place on the expanse of white sand. Severus was eager to see Hermione...to see *all* of her...but he wasn't eager to share that experience with random strangers. That had been his rationale as he chose the swimsuit he had purchased for her. There were other garments for sale, many which were, in his opinion, better suited to an adult wizard's

magazine than a public beach, but the one he had chosen had satisfied his requirements: to show him her charms without sharing them too blatantly with every passer-by.

They relaxed into low-set blue canvas chairs beneath a matching umbrella, and the impossibly clear water undulated to the horizon, the irrepressible tide washing to the shore mere metres from where they sat. A hotel employee delivered drinks to them, and Severus sipped his gin with lime as Hermione drank a pina colada. She seemed entirely relaxed, almost like a cat lazing in the sun, and the notion of stroking her to see if she would purr reminded him of the tube in his pocket.

'Sit forward,' he said, causing her to open her eyes and turn an inquisitive glance to him. He displayed the sunblock cream for her inspection.

She pushed her sunglasses atop her head, her pretty mouth curling up. 'Didn't you buy a sunscreen potion in the wizard shop at the Portkey Authority?' she asked, nevertheless sitting up and turning her mostly bare back to him.

'No,' he lied. 'If two English tourists disport themselves upon the beach without sunblock and without sunburns, it will give rise to questions from the Muggles.'

'I see,' she murmured, but to Severus, who had been alert all of his life to the many nuances of mockery, she sounded as if she were humouring him.

A peculiar certainty settled over him. She was teasing with him...this was another example of her sweet flirtation. She *wanted* him to massage her with the oily sunblock. He squeezed out a glob of the coconut-scented lotion and rubbed it between his palms to warm it before he touched her pale, bare skin.

Exquisitely attuned to her, to the sound and sight and smell of her, he heard the sharp intake of her breath as his fingers slid along the satin flesh above the strap bisecting her torso, and it was with an extreme exercise of his will that he refrained from drawing her body to his...sweet Circe, but he wanted her.

He smoothed the cream into her exposed skin, marvelling at its softness, forcing himself to experience *this* wonder without wishing for more. Here and now, he had his hands on Hermione's naked flesh, and here and now, it was sufficient. It was, in fact, a taste of heaven.

When he could no longer pretend that he had not covered her back completely, he shifted around to face her, squeezing more cream from the tube. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted, and on her features there existed an expression of such open, sensuous pleasure that his mouth went dry at the sight. Would she look thus when he made love to her? Would he have the opportunity to find out?

She opened her eyes, and he lifted the hand with the blob of sunblock. 'Now for the front,' he said, aware of the extreme nature of his bodily reaction to her, hoping that she would not look down and catch him out.

But Hermione's fingertips swept across his palm, gathering the lotion and smearing it into the centre of his chest, then stroking up, until she was smoothing the stuff along his collarbone, her gaze fixed upon the task with fierce concentration. He *had* swallowed the sunscreen potion...he had no intention of spending any part of this holiday sunburned and undesirous of her touch...but he would not inform her of this fact. He scarcely dared to breathe; he did not want to do anything that would cause her to stop what she was doing. Both of her hands were now engaged in spreading the sunblock over his pectoral muscles, and when the palms of her hands simultaneously stroked over the flat disks of his nipples, her luminous brown eyes rose to his face, and he so far forgot himself that his hands closed upon her waist.

'Fair is fair,' she said, lifting her face until her lips were a whisper from his.

A mother with two small children hurried past them at that moment, breaking the spell for Severus, who had been upon the cusp of a truly indecorous public display.

'Perhaps you could complete the job for yourself,' he said, passing the tube to her, noting the disappointment in her face. 'It would not do for you to be indisposed by sunburn during your holiday.' He moved into his chair, relieved that the interruption had served to dispel the distension in his swim trunks. 'I will procure the potion for you tomorrow,' he promised. He could not risk touching her in such a way in public...he could not be answerable for the consequences. That much was apparent.

While she completed the application of sun protection, he fortified himself with a healthy swallow of gin and was relieved with the return of comparative sanity. One thing was indisputable: the physical chemistry between them was powerful.

Hermione settled back into her chair and took up her pina colada, eyeing him playfully over the rim of her glass. 'How's the assessment coming along?' she asked.

A couple crossed in front of them, hand-in-hand, and Severus surveyed the bikini clad woman judiciously. 'Perhaps an element of comparative studies would not be a bad idea,' he mused.

She punched his upper arm, and he feigned distress. 'You needn't become violent,' he informed her.

'If I catch you staring at other women's bums, I'll go back to England!' she said querulously, and he heard a tone of something else...insecurity, perhaps? Self-doubt?

'Hermione,' he said softly, but she was looking away from him, her arms crossed protectively over her breasts. 'I was ... jesting. It was in poor taste. I apologise.'

He waited a moment for her response, but there was none. No softening of the sudden muscular tension in her frame. He bethought him of the contents of his other pocket, and judging the time to be opportune, he displayed it between his thumb and forefinger.

'Perhaps you would accept this gift as apology...a token of my esteem for you and all your ... parts.'

Now she turned to him, and seeing what he held, she squeaked in excitement.

'Is that Rita Skeeter?' she asked, taking the glass bottle and giving it a violent shake, watching with satisfaction as the beetle within fluttered its wings in agitation. 'When on earth did you get her?'

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'Did you truly imagine it would take me a full hour to shower and shave?'

Her jaw dropped. 'You captured her this morning?'

He shrugged. 'On my way back to your flat. She ... volunteered to demonstrate her Animagus abilities after certain ... inducements were provided.'

Hermione gave the bottle another rattle, watching the insect bouncing from side to side. 'What are you going to do with her?' she asked.

'That's entirely up to you, Hermione. She is my gift to you.'

Hermione watched him with narrowed eyes for a moment, then bestowed a shining smile upon him. 'This is the best present anyone ever gave me,' she pronounced.

He inclined his head in acceptance of her thanks. Then he said, 'The only bum on this beach of the least interest to me is currently residing in your chair,' he said. 'I am balked in my assessment.'

There, she was smiling again. His relief seemed ludicrously out of proportion to the event, but he was borne along on the tide of emotion flowing between them. The push and pull, give and take, had begun at the moment he found her bound and drugged in the storage room, and the more he gave in to it, the stronger the appeal of it became.

He signalled the waiter for two more drinks, and they lounged together, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the contemplation of ever more outrageous schemes for the disposition of a certain gossip columnist.

At last he rose to his feet. 'I shall leave you to enjoy the remainder of your sunbathing,' he said. 'I'll have a shower and go down for a brandy. Will you meet me in the bar

when you're ready for dinner?'

She treated him to another smile. 'Yes, thank you, Severus.'

And he made his way to the hotel room with his mind full of happy, smiling Hermione, feeling an unaccustomed sensation of wholeness.

Later, in the hotel bar, his thoughts were more sombre.

The bar was dark and modern, its only concession to its location the wall of windows at the far end, which looked out on an indisputably Caribbean night. Otherwise, the shining dark wood of the bar, the black tables with tasteful, square glass candle holders, and the cordovan leather of the booths could have been found in any bar in any upscale hotel in the world.

He opted for a snifter of cognac, and he nursed it slowly as he considered the night to come. His eyes wandered about the tables, where several couples sat together, romance seeming to hang about them like incense in the air. One couple held hands upon the table top, their fingers twined together; another pair stole a kiss in a darkened corner; and as Severus watched, a young man about Hermione's age approached a woman sitting alone at a table, and after an exchange of words, he seated himself across from her.

Severus sipped cognac and frowned. Was that why Hermione had come to Antigua? Had she hoped to hook up with a stranger? A younger, better-looking man, perhaps, to indulge in a holiday romance? His teeth clenched at the notion of some opportunistic stranger taking advantage of Hermione. He closed his eyes in disgust. How would an encounter with a stranger have been any worse than her consorting with a Death Eater twenty years her senior?

What was he doing here? He pulled at the knot of his necktie, and his hand slid briefly under his hair, feeling the sweat at his hairline. What had he been thinking when he pushed himself on her? Had it been the high emotions of their escape from the index and the thrill of the fight? Or was it the notion that a girl like Hermione Granger could fancy him? Did it matter? The important thing was that he had come to his senses, just in the nick of time. He would not make a fool of himself over a girl young enough to be his daughter. He would extricate himself from the situation and emerge with his dignity intact, neither of them the worse for wear.

Then she walked into the bar, and he was captivated. She was *extraordinary*. How could he ever have thought otherwise?

She wore a simple black dress with very high black heels. About her throat she wore a single strand of pearls, and her lips were a bold red. Her hair fell unrestrained down her back, brown, bushy, and entirely Hermione. He stood to greet her, and she walked up to him without so much as noticing the glances she received from other men in the room. She had eyes for no one else, and Severus' reaction to her was purely visceral. He could be as analytical as he liked outside of her presence, but once she was with him, reason was right out.

Hermione smiled up at him. 'I'm sorry I kept you waiting,' she said.

'It was worth the wait,' he assured her, and she blushed.

After a moment, she lowered her eyes. 'Does anything look good?'

He chuckled. 'Fishing, Miss Granger?'

She gestured to the leather folder beside his cognac glass. 'I thought you had perhaps reviewed the menu, Professor Snape.'

He gave himself a mental kick. *Do try not to be a complete arse* he counselled himself. Aloud, he said, 'The menu is replete with seafood of every description. Are you ready to go to the dining room?'

'I'm famished,' she said, and with a hand at the small of her back, he directed her to the restaurant.

Over plates of blackened snapper and sautéed tilapia, they conversed. Her eyes shone in the candlelight; her smiles and ready laugh bathed him in acceptance. She was fatally easy to talk to, as he had been discovering all this enchanted day in her company; he talked with Hermione Granger as he had never spoken with anyone in all his life, and he found that he liked the experience very much.

As the moon rose higher in the sky, his desire for her trailed its ascent, but he had made himself a promise, and he had every intention of seeing it through.

When there was a lull in the conversation, he watched her as she sipped her wine and raised a spoon of crème brûlée to her lips. 'Hermione,' he said, and her attention shifted back to him. 'You planned this holiday for yourself. I invited myself along, but you meant to be here alone...presumably, for a reason.'

He let his gaze wander the tables in the dining room, and it seemed to him that every one of them was occupied by a couple in the midst of a romantic dinner. He glanced back to her, and she was watching him with something like hurt. She dropped her spoon and took up her napkin to dab unnecessarily at her mouth.

'I've consulted the concierge, and there's another room available for me to sleep in tonight. Tomorrow, I'll go back home. I ... never meant to gate-crash your holiday.'

He was pleased with the even, pleasant tone of his voice. He spoke with just the right amount of amused self-deprecation, an older man extricating himself from an awkward situation with a bemused younger woman.

Hermione folded her napkin neatly and placed it next to her water glass. 'I can't prevent you from changing rooms,' she said, and then she was looking directly into his eyes, and his self-satisfaction evaporated. She continued, 'I will tell you, though, that I was ... enjoying our interaction so much every day at the Archives that I found myself thinking about you far more than was comfortable. I couldn't get up the nerve to ask you out, and you showed no sign of noticing me in any ... *significant* way.'

She took a nervous sip from her water glass, and Severus was aware of the pounding of his heart. What was she saying? How could anyone have the courage to make such a confession? Didn't she realise that he could laugh at her...could stand and walk away from her? How could she risk herself in such a way?

'Severus, I was coming on this trip in the hopes of finding a bit of romantic distraction...I won't lie about that. But I was doing it because I wanted *you*, and I didn't have the courage to tell you.'

She stood, and he stared up at her, his lips parted in surprise.

'I'm going up to our room now,' she said, looking fearlessly into his eyes. 'You'll pay for our meal, and you'll come up, too...either to get your things and break my heart, or to stay, and make me happier than I've ever been.'

And without another word, the little Gryffindor turned and left him where he sat, a victim of her courage.

Hermione rode up the lift in a welter of anxiety and hope, a truly nauseating mixture. Staring at the mirrors that lined the lift interior, she berated herself. What was *wrong* with her? How could she have thrown down the gauntlet to Severus Snape? Was she out of her mind? He couldn't be coerced...for the love of Merlin, he had stood between Dumbledore and Voldemort and still held onto himself...why had she challenged him like that? It would serve her right if he didn't come back at all. She wouldn't put it past him to leave Antigua without saying good-bye.

She probably didn't deserve any better.

The lift glided to a smooth stop and Hermione straightened from her slump against the wall. She would square her shoulders and lift her chin and walk to her room like a grown woman ...

The lift doors parted, and she was unable to exit, because a tall man filled the doorway. Severus Snape stood unmoving, blocking her exit, his burning eyes sweeping over her in a manner she might categorize as *proprietary* ... and then he swept her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing, and spun on his heel.

'Severus!' she said in a loud whisper. 'What are you doing? Someone might see us. Put me down!'

He did not dignify her protest with an answer, so she shut her mouth. She felt the wave of magic that opened their door before he deposited her in their room and closed the door behind them with a definitive snap. Then he twisted the deadlock and applied the chain, standing unmoving with his back to her, his head bowed.

Why did he seem so *angry*? And why wasn't he saying anything?

She watched his rigid form and tried desperately to regulate her breathing, for she was nearly gasping, as if she'd been running, and her heart thundered in her ears. Was she afraid of him? No...no, it wasn't fear. It was something even more powerful, and she was helpless against it. She took one step towards him and pressed her trembling hands against his back.

He turned at her touch and buried his hands in her hair. His eyes seared her, and then his mouth was on hers, scorching. There was no hesitancy here, no sign of the tentative, searching quality of his earlier caress. He kissed her hard, imperiously, and his tongue demanded entrance, sliding between her lips into the heat of her mouth, hot and insistent. The intimacy of this invasion weakened her knees, but one of his arms pulled her against him like a band of iron about her waist, steadying her in his embrace.

Hermione opened to him, accepting the intense heat of his onslaught, knowing that she was experiencing the essence of Severus Snape. Here was the manifestation of the incandescence shimmering behind his public façade, the part of him she had sensed and pursued greedily. Now he was pure flame, an inferno of emotion, and she the perfect tinder, in danger of being consumed to ash.

But she had no wish to disintegrate in the conflagration. What was the good of such an end, no matter how glorious? No, she had to fight fire with fire, consume flame with flame, or she had no business provoking this response from such a wizard.

And Hermione threaded her hands through his hair and stroked his tongue with her own, drawing an audible groan from his throat. With that simple oral assault, the tables were turned, and he trembled against her, needful and receptive. After the hours they spent in the stacks of the National Wizarding Archives, he had haunted her dreams, both sleeping and waking, feeding her wild desire with every quirk of his eyebrow, every sneer of his mouth, every whisper of his intellect slithering against hers. Now she kissed him rapaciously, feeding her ardour with the fuel of her months of desperate, unrequited passion, and the very air surrounding them seemed combustible, another element of their mutual wildfire.

Then his fingers were upon the zip at the back of her dress, and she broke the kiss, her hands upon his shoulders, holding him off her. 'You're staying then?' she asked, even as the cool night air touched her flesh, quickly followed by Severus' hands.

'I have a bum assessment to complete,' he informed her, cupping her arse cheeks with his hands, 'and the next step is a thorough manual examination.'

She felt a bubble of mirth rise in her, a giddiness that she embraced, confident that the storm of passion lurked just beneath it, a flash-fire ready to flare between them at the least provocation. 'Does that mean we're going to get naked?'

'Indeed,' he confirmed, a wicked smile curving his beautifully formed lips. 'Rumour has it, you know, that you fancy me.'

Hermione was assailed then with an arc of bright feeling, an emotion which trembled through her, leaving her breathless. With infinite tenderness, she cupped his cheek and said, 'Sometimes, Severus, even rumours contain an element of truth.'

His head descended, and he kissed her again, confirming Hermione's supposition: The air ignited and they were flame, consuming the night.