

London's Burning

by *TeddyRadiator*

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This harmless little piece of fluff was written for the 2010 SSHG_Exchange.

One: Life Is Uncertain; Eat Dessert First

Chapter 1 of 2

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Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters of this story belong to me even the original idea belongs to someone else. The characters belong to JK Rowling and Warner Brothers, who left my only reason for reading the Harry Potter Series bleeding to death, first in a dusty Shrieking Shack, then in a pristine boat house. I've stoppered death; I'm building a better world.

Special thanks to my sterling, beautiful, can't-live-without beta stgulik, who turned this around so fast I would swear she's got a time-turner.

Be warned - here there be fluff...

Hermione Granger had had a privileged childhood, no doubt about it. Her parents were hard-working dentists, with a bit of money and a love of travel, and she'd vacationed in just about every major city in the world with them. She'd watched a waiter walk out the front door of her hotel in Anacapri to pluck an orange for her breakfast juice. She'd danced with Cossacks in St. Petersburg. She had attended a formal tea ceremony in Japan and the Bolshoi in Moscow, and had touched history in the Parthenon.

She'd dined on the Left Bank in Paris; she'd had an audience with the Pope in Rome. She'd been to Brazil, Beijing, Barcelona, Egypt, Jerusalem, Morocco, Montevideo, the States, the Seychelles, the Caymans, the Orkneys, Oslo, Toronto, Toledo, Tokyo and Venice.

None of them held a candle to London.

Perhaps she was merely unapologetically British, but London was the one place, save perhaps Hogwarts, that made her blood race and her eyes bright with excitement. It was a city whose pulse you could feel beneath your feet as you moved restlessly from the West End to Whitechapel, and no matter what part of London in which she found herself, Hermione felt alive, right down to her fingertips.

In the ten years after what was called Voldemort War II, or WWII (which the Muggle part of her mind always processed as the latest Volkswagen sedan), Hermione Granger found herself in her favourite city, her adopted home, basking in a rare June heat that drove people out on the streets in great throngs around pub beer gardens and shady parks. London was shimmering with life.

Hermione had never felt so alone.

Sitting at a table on the sidewalk outside the lovely little Cypriote restaurant around the corner from Covent Garden, Hermione watched life passing her by. Oh, not that she

so much minded being alone, but she did mind feeling lonely. As much as London thrilled and inspired her, it had a way of throwing her single, unattached state of affairs into sharp relief.

The trip to London itself was an exercise in loneliness. It was supposed to be a reunion of sorts between her, Ron and Harry, a sort of let's-get-together-and-remember-while-getting-pissed-and-eating-lots-of-good-food reunion, and she had been looking forward to it for months. She'd badgered Minerva into giving her a long weekend off from her duties as Professor of Muggle Studies (no mean feat this close to the end of school), and had planned the weekend as meticulously as she had once prepared their revision schedules as a student.

They were to meet on Friday at Waterloo station, then visit the Imperial War Museum, and follow up with dinner at the new Culinaire Alley eatery everyone was talking about, *Le Sorcier Noir*. It amused and dismayed Hermione in equal measures that a restaurant could call itself "The Dark Wizard" nowadays and no one batted an eyelid. Still, it had received a Wizarding Michelin Two Dozen Sparx Rating, and it had taken her a week of wrangling and owls just to get a table for three.

Then, Thursday evening, while Hermione was packing, she had felt her wards shimmer, indicating that a Floo was coming through. "Oh, no," she groaned inwardly. She was suddenly filled with an inexplicable certainty that it was one of the boys, and they were crying off the weekend.

She'd been wrong. It was both of them, sheepishly begging off with excuses so flimsy a Quidditch team could have raced through the holes.

Ron, it seemed, was stuck in Barcelona with the Chudley Cannons (still playing Keeper), and they were doing an exhibition and he just *HAD* to stay and there was *NO* way he could get back before Monday. From the amount of glass clinking in the background and loud, high-pitched female laughter, the exhibition mostly seemed to consist of how drunk they could all get before they passed out.

"I'm sorry, mate," Ron said, his voice already slightly slurry and whiny with regret. "I promise I'll make it up to you leave it!" he laughed, gesturing playfully to the faceless, nameless girl at his side. "We'll all get together next month when I'm back in that's my arse! back in England, yeah?"

Hiding her irritation and disappointment, Hermione smiled brightly. "Yeah, sure, Ron. No problem. These things happen." Her voice could not have been more chipper. "Well, must dash. Another Floo call is coming through."

She had just enough time to compose her face when Harry Floo-ed in with an equally lame excuse. By then, Hermione was so disgusted by the two of them, she barely heard his feeble reason for being unavailable for the weekend. *Let's face it, Harry*, Hermione thought to herself, as the Floo line closed, *Ginny isn't going to let you out of her sight long enough to enjoy yourself*. Hermione already privately referred to Harry as The Boy Who Lived To Be Pussy-Whipped By His Wife.

Her own thoughts depressed her. These were her two best friends, after all. Well, they *were* her two best friends. As the years wore on, she had to admit that they'd drifted apart; weekly correspondence had become monthly, then every few weeks, then on birthdays and holidays, then the occasional Christmas card, hastily bought, scribbled with a few quick words while an impatient postal owl waited. She couldn't blame them; she was as guilty of it as they were.

And they were busy leading their lives. Harry was Head of the Auror Department and had a very high-pressure, high-profile position. In addition, he and Ginny had started a family almost the day they got married, and with two kids and one on the way, Ginny was understandably not that keen for Harry to take a trip down memory lane with Hermione and Ron while she stayed behind, nursing the two ankle biters - and with two swollen ankles.

Ron was busy, as well. As a rising star for one of the minor semi-pro Quidditch Teams, he was on the go constantly - a different town every day and a different witch to go with it. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Hermione would think about just how close they had come to getting engaged, and shudder. Better to be single than with a bloke who made his living travelling and making his way through every witch with a pulse who crooked her wand his way. No, thank you. Hermione treasured her peace of mind.

After ending the Floo calls with the boys, she'd almost cancelled all her plans, but decided at the last moment to go. In reality, she couldn't stand the thought of the well-meaning but slightly pitying remarks she would receive from her fellow teachers about 'best laid plans of mice and men' and 'we lonely old spinsters can get together for a wee dram.' As much as she loved Hogwarts, being its youngest professor by about fifty years sometimes made her feel like she was being buried alive.

So she'd caught the train to Waterloo Station (she wasn't exactly in a hurry now), and enjoyed a fascinating day at the Imperial War Museum. She spent a pleasant afternoon taking Muggle photos and jotting down notes. By the time the Museum closed, she'd been so tired she sneakily Apparated back to her hotel room.

Unfortunately, she'd napped so long, she completely missed her reservation at *Le Sorcier Noir*. She knew they would fill the table, but Hermione was still a young woman of manners, so she'd assuaged her guilt by ordering room service and watching a rather odd film on the telly about a singing barber who killed his customers and then assisted his neighbor into cutting them up for meat pies. Hermione grimaced. She'd never been one for meat pies.

Hermione signaled the waiter for Commandaria and Katmer, her favourite dessert, and one of the Cypriote restaurant's specialties. She smiled in anticipation as the amber-coloured dessert wine was placed on her table, alongside three lovely little phyllo cylinders, stuffed with almonds and drizzled in syrup.

It had been ages since she'd eaten katmer, and the confections were as lovely to look at as to eat. As Hermione savoured the anticipation, she idly wondered why she didn't treat herself more often. She rather thought that it was a metaphor for what her life had become. Long bouts of ennui, punctuated by the occasional treat to bolster and convince herself that there was something to look forward to besides the manic crush of the coming school year.

Looking up from this temple-aching mass of sugar disguised as flaky, buttery pastry, Hermione realized that the waiter was hovering, obviously wanting her opinion. She'd seen his type before: a good-looking fellow of Mediterranean extraction who fancied himself a lady's man.

"Well, don't be shy, tuck in," he said, smiling. He had a huge mouthful of white teeth; it was like being smiled at by a piano. She smiled back, and took a sip of her excellent wine.

"Do you live in London?" the waiter queried, pretending to clean the next table in order to give himself an excuse to hang around.

"No, just visiting for the weekend," she said, raising the first forkful of katmer to her lips. Just as she was about to take a longed-for bite, he interjected again.

"Oh, lovely. What do you do when you're not visiting?"

Merlin, why did I get the nosiest waiter in London? Biting back a retort, Hermione smiled sweetly. "I'm a school teacher."

The waiter looked very impressed, and gave her his eighty-eight key smile. Her parents would have drooled over his bicuspid. "A teacher, eh? Smart lady. I can see I'll have to watch my p's and q's around you," he teased.

"Yeah, you do that while I watch my diet go down the drain," she muttered to her dessert. So intent was Hermione in digging into her pastry that she did not see the tall figure approach her until his shadow fell across her table. Bringing a second forkful of katmer to her mouth, she was about to ask the waiter for some water, arsenic, anything, just to be left in peace. She glanced upward, saw the owner of the shadow, then promptly dropped her fork in her lap.

"Profes Mist-Sever-SIR!" she babbled, and rose so quickly she caught the tablecloth on her belt buckle, jarring the table. Her glass of wine fell over onto her katmer, and the fork landed on the floor. She and the waiter dove to get it at the same time and bumped heads so hard Hermione saw stars.

Staggering to her feet, Hermione shot the waiter a look that would peel tomatoes and turned to her former Potions master. Mopping up wine with one hand while extending the other, she said happily, "Wow! This is such a lovely surprise!"

Severus Snape took the proffered hand with thinly concealed amusement. "Thank you, Miss Granger. It's comforting to know that some things never change." He looked down at her, still valiantly trying to keep her dessert wine from finding its way into her lap. "I apologise for startling you."

The waiter, instead of quitting while he was ahead, joined the fracas, and the commotion and attention they were stirring gave Hermione the impression Severus was wishing he'd kept his mouth shut and passed by his former student.

She decided to cut her losses and start over. "Sorry about that! This is such a surprise, after all! Won't you join me?" She gestured to the wrecked table, stained with wine and plated with soggy pastry. She slumped slightly. *Or maybe I'll just slide out of London in a pool of my own humiliation.*

"Would the Miss like a new table?" asked the waiter, smiling his second-best grin.

Snape, apparently deciding to give the situation the benefit of the doubt, replied in voice that Hermione remembered like Merlin Almighty's. "That would be lovely, thank you. The Miss and I will sit here, if it's available." He indicated a table nearby, and that was how Hermione and Severus Snape found themselves in a restaurant, sharing wine and pastry, on one of the finest summer days London could offer.

"I must admit you were the last person I expected to see today, no offence," Hermione said after they'd settled. In reality, she was stunned. When Severus Snape had provided the cover fire Harry needed to defeat Voldemort, he had at first been inundated by praise as one of the heroes of the hour. But almost as quickly as the dust had settled, Snape had turned in his resignation to Headmaster Dumbledore and left for parts unknown. It had been a long time since she'd seen him, and ages since she'd heard any gossip about him. In the Wizarding world, it was truly out of sight, out of mind.

"Yes, well, I was passing by and recognized you, and, quite frankly," he leaned in close, and Hermione felt her heart flutter as she caught the scent of his cologne, "you looked like you could use a little, shall we say, rescuing?" His mouth quirked up at the corners, and Hermione found herself smirking in return.

"Oh, you mean from Mr. Steinway over there?"

"Steinway?" Severus looked at the waiter curiously, and Hermione glanced at the offending waiter ruefully.

"Oh, I don't know his name, but he just keeps giving these huge, toothy smiles, and he just reminds me of a keyboard, all big white ivories." She made a dismissive gesture, smiling. "He's not so bad, but I don't usually come here by myself, so he must have thought I was a bit on the prowl." She felt instantly idiotic. "Not that I go on the prowl, alone, mind you, but since I wasn't surrounded by men, he must've thought "

She stopped. What was it about this man that instantly reduced her to a gawky eighteen year-old? After the war, she had sought him out, to speak with him alone, and she ended up stumbling through a garbled thanks, trying to make him understand how grateful she was for all he'd done for Harry, how much she admired him and would love to get to know him. In the end, she'd just left him and walked away, feeling like the biggest prat on the planet. He had never said a word to her; but then again, she'd hardly dazzled him with her brilliance.

Looking at him now, expecting him to either scrape her off the sidewalk with a scathing remark, or sip his coffee and get the hell away from her as fast as possible, Hermione took a deep breath.

"I honestly believe it's my destiny to make a complete fool out of myself anytime I have the chance with you," she said.

To her surprise he smiled. Narrowing his eyes, he replied, "I do seem to recall our last meeting as professor and student did not show you in your finest light, Miss Granger." He sat back, and with a small shrug, he added, "And, in light of shared experiences in the past, the less said about 'destiny,' the better."

She nodded. "Agreed. But only if you call me Hermione."

He sketched a little bow. "Agreed. And since I'm no longer anyone's professor, and Mr. Snape makes me sound positively predatory, please call me Severus."

For a moment, they calmly studied one another. Hermione was stunned at the change in Severus Snape. "You know, the last time I saw so much as a photograph of you was last year at the Ministry's Anniversary Ball."

He managed to look pained. "Ah yes. One of the great reminders of why I never attend those dreary functions." He'd been standing between Minerva McGonagall and Harry, looking calmly uncomfortable as he allowed the Minister to pin his Order of Merlin, First Class on his dress robes.

"Well you looked good, but rather out of your element, if you don't mind me saying."

He acknowledged the compliment by saluting her with his water glass. "I don't recall see you there, Hermione. The 'Golden Trio' was represented by the ever-popular Mr. Potter and his wife. I understood at the time that you and Mr. Weasley had decided to go your separate ways."

Hermione nodded. With a sad little smile, she added, "I think in the end he and I realized that, if we got married, I would go mental and take him with me, so we both sat down and broke the news to the Weasleys." She wrinkled her nose.

Severus' eyebrows rose. "The news was not taken well?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I think Molly is still in mourning. Though why she ever thought Ron and I would have lasted longer than his first full Quidditch season is beyond me." She gave a dismissive glance at the new waiter who replenished her wine and katmer. "She actually did swoon a little when I mentioned that I wasn't planning on punching out a kid every other year, but hey, she wasn't giving birth to them or having to raise them, so I felt justified in telling her so." Hermione smiled crookedly. "Might have been a mistake."

"Indeed," Severus replied, taking another sip of water. He looked around casually, then returned his attention to Hermione. "So what brings you to London during a school week, Hermione?"

Without preamble, Hermione chatted about her failed reunion with Ron and Harry. This segued into work, and school, and students and professors and everything in between. At his subtle prompting, she forgot her awkwardness and began to talk about different subjects, off the beaten path of her regular, safe, bland conversations with friends, students and teachers, and into the murkier waters of real life.

"I confess, I understand you a little better now," Hermione said, as a new waiter refilled their glasses.

Severus picked up the glass with casual grace. Hermione noticed he made every gesture with elegance, as if he'd trained himself so well that it appeared to be second nature. In this case, however, he seemed more preoccupied in giving himself something to do rather than being genuinely thirsty. "Understand me? How so, Hermione?"

She took a moment. How to phrase this without offending him? She was honestly enjoying herself with Severus Snape. She was hoping to enjoy him more. "I understand the isolation a little more, now that I work at Hogwarts. Being up there, being the youngest teacher, being surrounded by " She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Well, let's just say I know the length and breadth and depth of the definition of the word 'dunderhead' now."

His soft chuckle gave Hermione a pleasant little glow in her belly, and she ducked her head again. "Not that I can imagine how things must have been "

"Let's stop there," Severus interrupted smoothly, with a tinge of sadness. "I would prefer we not dredge up ghosts of the past. Things change; people change." He leaned forward. "We've both changed."

Hermione looked at him closely. Yes, he'd changed, all right. Gone was the perpetual scowl, the angry, brittle resentment that leaked from every pore. He was still lean and

pale; in the sunshine he looked striking, unique, dramatic. His black hair, gleaming with a bluish cast, was still long, and he still tossed his head to either cover or remove it from his eyes.

If anything, he seemed younger now, less tense, of course, but mostly more at peace with himself. He also looked rather rakish, and more than one woman gave him a cool, appraising look as she passed them by. Severus Snape could be called many things, but ordinary wasn't one of them. Hermione started to feel a little smug, sitting in the London sunshine with such an interesting-looking, appealing man.

He still wore black; Hermione privately considered that the world might just fall off its axis and roll away like a bowling ball should Severus Snape wear anything but his trademark colour. Black trousers were paired with a crisp white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows. When he moved, she could see the faintest line of his Dark Mark. He looked and sounded like a Bond villain: cool, calculating, suave and sexy. She wondered if he thought of himself that way. She then wondered what he thought of her.

She stopped that line of thought immediately. *This interesting wizard has seen you trip, fall, hexed, humiliated and caught after-hours in a clumsy fumble with Ron. You've set him on fire, stolen from him, cowered behind him, been humiliated by him and at various times in your youth you've alternately attempted to kill him and save his life.*

Their shared history loomed between them as large as a chasm, and Hermione felt a surprisingly sharp pang of regret at the realization Severus Snape would, in all likelihood, always see her as a goofy little girl who spent the first seven years of their association getting up his nose.

But, on the other hand, he'd indicated that he wasn't interested in revisiting the past. Perhaps they might find a new friendship in the future. Hermione decided to stop trying to meet him on old ground and forge ahead. Perhaps she and Severus could view each other as more than just former professor and student. If that was the case, he might at least be willing to meet her halfway as a friend.

In the few seconds she'd taken to roll this around in her mind, she felt his intense concentration on her, and looked up to meet his eyes. They were the same midnight-black eyes she remembered, but there was something new about them. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but it excited her, and Hermione hadn't felt excited like this in a long time.

So she did what she always did - started talking again. She told him all about the meticulously planned weekend, and how Ron and Harry had bailed at the last minute and the War Museum and lunch and...

Severus allowed her to babble on, covering old ground, until she simply ran out of steam and stared into the distance, feeling like a complete numpty. To compensate, she grabbed her knife and fork and stabbed at the katmer. "So, I decided the hell with the boys, I would treat myself for the weekend and pretend I'm royalty in exile."

Bemused, Severus toasted her with his glass. "Here's to a lovely weekend, Your Majesty."

She nodded regally to acknowledge his accolades, then took another bite of her dessert. Severus watched her with veiled amusement as she closed her eyes and savoured the confection. The combination of sugar, wine and her own insecurity hit her bloodstream at once, and without thinking, Hermione moaned, "Oh, gods, this is better than sex."

She shivered, and licked her lips lasciviously. "You really must try this!" She speared a forkful of the katmer and offered it to him. Their eyes met, and for a split second, Hermione heard her last two sentences in her head as if through a playback machine. She could not have felt more self-conscious if she'd taken lessons. She decided to brazen it out, and held the fork out to him challengingly.

He gave her a look so indescribable she felt as if something warm had been placed in her lap. In a tone of voice only he could produce, he drawled, "Better than sex?" His eyebrow translated what had been left unsaid. "Let's see then." With a strange glint in his eye he leaned forward, and instead of taking the fork from her hand, he allowed her to feed him the morsel. With his eyes locked onto hers, his lips parted and the tiniest hint of his tongue snaked out beneath the fork.

Hermione watched his lips in fascination, and when his mouth closed over her fork she released the breath she'd been holding. He closed his eyes in a slow blink, and when he opened them again Hermione found herself staring at him, biting her lower lip.

He gently pulled the dessert into his mouth and straightened, chewing slowly. For a moment, they simply looked into one another's eyes. With a smirk, Severus swallowed, licked his lips and leaned forward, resting his chin on his steepled fingers. He made a little moue of approval. "Very nice." His tone became more finely tuned with irony. "I'm not sure I can attest to it being better than sex, but perhaps that is a discussion for another time."

Hermione didn't want to blush, but she could feel the heat wash over her, down to the pit of her stomach. "How do you do it?" she said, before she could rein the words in.

His lips twitched. "Do what?"

Hermione momentarily closed her eyes. With a deep breath, she forced herself to smile, and she replied, "Perhaps *that* is a discussion for another time." He glanced off to the side and truly laughed. It was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard. "A person could get used that laugh, Severus."

He sobered. "A person could get used to that... katmer, Hermione."

Hermione held his gaze, then looked down at her plate. This chance meeting had gone better than she could ever have hoped, but she ought to end this now, rather than spoil it by doing something incredibly embarrassing, like asking him out and having to listen to the pity in his voice when he made his excuses and refused. For all she knew, he was already in a relationship and meeting her here was just a coincidence she'd already read far too much into. She moved in her chair restlessly, and reached for her bag.

He watched her, and something like alarm rose in his expression. Apropos of nothing, he briskly interjected. "And why, Hermione, if you're at such loose ends, did you not show up last night?"

The question zoomed so in so far of left field Hermione didn't completely process it. She settled in her chair. "Show up where?" she asked.

"For your dinner reservation."

She blinked. "Reservation?" She shook her head. "I don't remember mentioning a dinner reservation."

He gave her a steady look of expectation. "*Le Sorcier Noir?*"

Hermione grew very still. "How how did you know about that?"

"I'm the owner," he replied.

All her breath left Hermione in a huff. "You're kidding! I had no idea!"

Severus dropped his head so characteristically Hermione felt a rush of nostalgia. He was pleased with her reaction; he just didn't know how to show it. Through the curtain of shining hair, he said, "Well, I'm a co-owner. A silent partner, if you will."

Hermione was completely nonplussed. "I can't believe that Minerva didn't mention it! I've been talking about that reservation for weeks." Realisation dawned, and Hermione felt the breath rush from her lungs. "Is that how you found me the Headmistress?"

Severus shrugged modestly. "Well, I wouldn't be much of an ex-spy if I couldn't winkle information out of an old hag like Minerva."

Hermione gasped in pretended shock and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Old hag? I'll tell her you said that."

He smirked. "It's nothing that she hasn't heard me call her before. Old friends can get away with that, you know."

Hermione shook her head, then fixed him with a steely gaze. "You're changing the subject. So, how did you become the owner excuse me, co-owner - of the most popular restaurant in Wizarding Britain?"

He gave her an incredulous look. "As popular as that? I must remember to tell Lucius. He'll be thrilled. He's my business partner." Hermione was about to remind him of his Wizarding Michelin Sparx, but realised he was teasing her, so she bit back a retort and let him continue.

"After the war I wanted to retire from teaching and leave Wizarding Britain. I had planned on moving away permanently, but fate had other plans, it seems."

Hermione nodded, willing him to go on, to regale her in his beautiful voice. "I moved to Tuscany. Lucius had a villa there, and while I was sitting around trying to decide what I wanted to do with the next hundred or so years of my life, I started cooking. I found I had an affinity for it. What's more, I enjoyed it."

"Not surprising. A Potions master has to understand ingredients and quantities," Hermione interjected. With a smile, she added, "I'm surprised you hadn't realized your cooking abilities sooner."

Severus shrugged. "You know as well as I that Hogwarts encourages laziness in its staff; house-elves do everything for you, including preparing your food. Before that, well, let's just say my parents weren't the sort to indulge that kind of hobby." He dropped into a thick Mancunian accent. "To my late, not-to-be-lamented father, cooking was women's work and practically guaranteed you to become a homosexual if you were a bloke."

Hermione smiled sadly. "Like that, huh?"

He nodded, and said placidly, "Like that. Until I was eighteen or so I was afraid to boil an egg. I was convinced if I did I'd automatically transfigure into the arch-poop of Slytherin. It was about that time that I -" He stopped suddenly, and favoured her with a look that could almost be considered coy.

Charmed at this sudden discomfort, Hermione wheedled, "You what? Do tell, Professor."

He glanced at her shortly, then gave her a little cat-like smile. "Let's just say that around that time I was afforded the opportunity to discover that I wasn't in any danger of cooking myself gay."

Hermione's laughter floated out onto the street, causing several men to look her way approvingly. Severus looked down at his hands and smiled. "Anyway, I started creating my own dishes and started consulting with other, more established chefs in the area, and decided to open my own restaurant. It was Lucius who convinced me to locate it here in Wizarding London."

Hermione nodded. "Of course! Culinaire Alley almost closed down completely during the last days of the war." She was impressed. "I remember how *Le Sorcier Noir* helped to stimulate the economy there. Smart move."

Severus shrugged modestly. "It pays the bills."

Hermione shook her head, incredulous. "It does a little more than just pay the bills! It's marvelous." She beamed. "Congratulations, Severus. If anyone deserves success, it's you."

He looked at her keenly, as if trying to sense any condescension on her part. After apparently detecting no jeering tone in her voice, he accepted her accolades modestly. "That is kind of you. But now you are attempting to change the subject." He pretended to scowl. "Why did you not come, Miss Granger?"

It was Hermione's turn to duck her head shyly. "Would you believe I fell asleep and forgot?"

"Not. Good. Enough." He sat back. "We held your table for over an hour. My maître d' was crushed that the lynchpin of the Golden Trio never showed up. I was most disappointed in you."

Hermione, hearing the silky, teasing note in his voice, felt a little frisson of pleasure. Blimey, Severus Snape was flirting! With her! And he was good at it. Hermione smiled at him, and saw immediately that beneath the confident exterior, there was that certain something in his eyes again. She recognized it this time. It was insecurity. Severus Snape may have changed his dress, his appearance, his manner, but he was still just a man, trying to impress a woman. Hermione suddenly felt a bit empowered.

She tilted her head, and stroked the rim of her water glass. "Oh, dear, I do so hate to disappoint you, sir." She favoured him with a contrite little pout. "How ever can I make it up? I'm afraid my days serving detention are long gone."

As if sensing the game was afoot, Severus sat back and smirked. "Would that it were not so! I suppose you'll just have to come tonight. I can't have my maître d' upset."

"No, we can't have that." Hermione found herself enjoying this little game, and from the way he was looking at her, he was enjoying it as well.

Severus replied, "Then shall we say eight o'clock? My treat. The Lobster Thermidore is the chef's special this evening."

"Lobster Thermidore? My favourite!" Hermione's smile faded. "Oh, don't get me wrong - I'd love to but you see, I have tickets tonight for the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall." She bit her lip. *Now or never, Granger.* "Look, why don't you come with me? I've got a whole box to myself."

He pretended to consider, then leaned forward, his voice warm and soft. "I'd be honoured to share your box, Hermione."

Gods, he makes everything sound like sex, she thought. *Then again, it's been so long since I've had a good shag anything sounds like sex.*

"Excellent. In fact, better than excellent!" Confidentially, she added, "In all honesty, I wasn't really looking forward to having the boys there; I knew they would hate it, so I got a box in case they fell asleep. Going to a music concert's really no fun by oneself. You need to be able to sit beside someone and kibitz about it."

Severus regarded her thoughtfully. "In that case, why don't we plan to eat afterward? I'm sure chef could hold a few lobsters back."

Hermione smiled. She loved lobster. She also thought she might end up nibbling on Snape Thermadore if she played her cards right. "It sounds like a plan, Severus. I'll see you in front of the Royal Albert Hall at 7:30 sharp. I'll be the one surrounded by admirers throwing flowers at my feet." She pretended to preen imperiously, hoping to make him laugh again.

He gave her a long, penetrating look, then made to stand. "Half seven it is, then. I have some errands between now and then, so I'll take my leave now, Your Majesty." He reached for her hand, and kissed it, his eyes never leaving hers. In a voice so creamy and smooth she felt it trickle between her breasts, he purred, "Wear something pretty, Hermione Granger. I'm planning on sweeping you off your feet."

With that, he turned and strode away, and Hermione sat for a moment, shaking her head, wondering exactly what had just transpired. She looked around self-consciously, but London was bustling around her; no one took any notice of the pretty young witch smiling to herself.

Finally, she closed her eyes and popped the last of the katmer in her mouth, sighing happily that there were such things in the world as a lovely dessert and the intriguing wizard disappearing around the corner.

Two: Crazy World

Chapter 2 of 2

First you drive me wild, and then you win my heart with your wicked art...

This harmless little piece of fluff was written for the 2010 SSHG_Exchange.

The same thing applies to this chapter as the first. I do not own the characters, but they are such fun to play with.

Hermione had always been told by her mother that red did not suit her; it was too bright a colour and it clashed with her hair. So naturally, she bought a red dress while in Knightsbridge that afternoon at a gorgeous little boutique called SugarBags. Ever since her impromptu date with Severus she'd been thinking some decidedly wicked thoughts where her former professor was concerned. The dress was there to ensure he returned the favour.

"I need the perfect dress for an evening at the Proms," she'd told the shopkeeper. Bolstered by her newfound confidence, she breezily checked off her prerequisites. "It should be gorgeous but not ostentatious, sexy but not sleazy. I need for it to say, 'I'm all yours' but not in a tarty way, and it should be comfortable and pretty and have my date on his knees in twenty minutes begging me for the privilege of licking the dirt from my shoes."

The shopkeeper never batted an eye. She merely pointed to the dressing booth. Fifteen minutes later, Hermione was in the understatedly gorgeous, innocently flirty, accessibly cozy, sole-licking inducing, sexy red dress of her dreams. The gown had slightly off-shoulder short sleeves, was shape-hugging with a provocative slit up the back, and made a delightful little whisper as she moved. Matching shoes, shimmering silk stockings and modest gold jewelry completed the ensemble.

She looked elegant, poised and, dare she to think it, beautiful. The owner beamed behind her and caught her eye in the reflection. "Let's hope your man speaks fluent 'Sin,' dearie, because this outfit is from the Mother Country."

As Hermione purchased her ensemble and thanked the shop owner, she smiled to herself. *Let's hope your man speaks fluent 'Sin.'* Hermione thought of Severus eating her dessert; she remembered how her body had reacted as his lips cradled the bottom of the fork as his mouth closed over it. The thought segued into *something tells me Severus might definitely be into speaking in tongues.* She gave herself a mental eye roll. *Get a grip, Granger. At least give him a chance to do something before you start sloshing around in your knickers.*

Her lecherous thoughts left her wondering when her former professor had turned into potential boyfriend material. *Probably halfway between licking katmer off my fork and the warning about sweeping me off my feet.*

As she charmed her hair to cascade in loose ringlets, Hermione silently thanked the gods that she had roomed with Lavender Brown, a witch who knew more glamour and make-up charms than anyone else on the planet. She had never wanted to look good as much as she did on this particular night. Adhering to Lavender's adage 'understate by two,' Hermione slicked her lips with a sheer lip gloss, grabbed her matching purse and left the hotel, ready to either wow Severus Snape or scare him into retreating back to his restaurant, never to return.

Severus walked the short distance from the Apparition point to the Albert Hall, his long limbs striding evenly and smoothly. To the observant bystander, he was the epitome of menacing calm and sinister elegance. His Muggle suit was close enough to his formal Wizarding attire as to be comfortable, but he had dressed with care. He told himself he wasn't nervous. He was merely looking forward to an evening of lovely music in London's most recognisable concert hall with a pretty young former student. A former student he had been obsessing about since his last visit to Hogwarts almost two years ago.

When he'd returned from Tuscany, he'd quietly moved into Hogsmeade, rented a house in the outlying area and settled in to cook and relax and try to find his way back into Wizarding Britain's society. Paying a visit to Albus and Minerva had seemed like the most natural thing to do. In retrospect, he was glad; Albus quietly passed away the next year, leaving Minerva in charge of Hogwarts and Severus bereft of the one man who had at least tried, with varying degrees of success, to guide Severus back to the light. For all of Albus' many faults, he had loved Severus.

They had taken a walk through the school, Albus leaning on Severus' arm. They had passed several closed classrooms, when Albus paused at the door to the Muggle Studies class. They could hear the professor within calling out questions in a clear, merry voice, and students answering her in the same, confident manner.

"Our Miss Granger," Albus had whispered, giving Severus' arm a squeeze. "She's become quite a favourite here."

Severus made a little dismissive grunt of disapproval. "Mucking about makes some teachers popular, if that is all they're capable of doing."

"Severus." Albus had a way of saying his name that encompassed a lifetime of disapproval, disappointment and dismay in those three simple syllables. "Grades in Muggle Studies have risen 400% since Miss Granger joined us. She's a born instructor."

"Hmm," Severus replied, unimpressed. "I suppose if being in love with the sound of your own voice makes a good teacher, then Miss Granger should be a shoo-in for 'Professor Of The Year.'"

Albus shook his head. To Severus' surprise, the old man was smiling. "You are never so scathing as when you don't wish to appear interested."

Severus had merely stared at his old Headmaster and snorted. In his mind, he recalled Hermione Granger coming to visit him shortly after the war. Coltish and ungainly, she had stammered her thanks to him for his part in helping Potter defeat the Dark Lord. He had been bemused at her flustered, gawky state. He felt a twinge of remorse that he'd merely sat back and fed her the rope while she hanged herself with her own insecurity, but at the time he was too busy wrestling with his own demons not to take some perverse pleasure in witnessing her struggling with her own.

As if reading his thoughts, Albus said, "Ah, memories." He looked around, his eyes rheumy and distant. "Some of my fondest memories are times I've spent here. Mind you," he added, his blue eyes merry, "some of my darkest are as well."

Severus nodded, absently, and both men were silent again. Suddenly the Headmaster said, "Would you ever consider returning, Severus?" He smiled at the younger wizard. "Hogwarts will always have a place for you."

Severus scoffed. "Not in a million years, Albus. In case it has escaped your attention, I'm not terribly fond of children. Nor, for that matter, are they fond of me."

"Pity," Dumbledore said, looking unsurprised, but regretful nevertheless. "Hogwarts needs teachers like you; professors with energy and experience. It's a time of renewal here. It would be good to have your help in bringing this venerable old school into the new millennium." He patted Severus' shoulder. "You will let Minerva know if you ever change your mind and wish to return, won't you? She misses you."

Puzzled, Severus looked into the Headmaster's eyes. "Why on earth would I wish to return? Lucius and I are already talking about opening a restaurant; it would be a new beginning -"

"New beginnings come in all shapes and sizes, Severus. Sometimes it's just a matter of knowing where to look for them. Case in point -"

As he spoke, class ended and they stood watching the fourth years filing out. Hermione exited with her class, and Severus' heart leapt at the sight of the lovely, poised woman, chatting confidently with her students. There was a staggering difference between the awkward seventeen-year-old who had stammered her appreciation to him and the witch she had become. Severus felt something within stirring to life, like a phoenix rising from old, sterile ashes into a new dawn, bursting with life.

Hermione was light and energy, and in the morning sun she looked like an angel. It was obvious her students idolised her. The boys, he saw with amusement, ogled her openly. He couldn't blame them. She was every school boy's fantasy, as far as he was concerned. He turned to Albus to suggest they move on, and nearly hexed the knowing look off the old man's face.

The rest of that day, he seemed to see her everywhere; she was a whirling dervish of activity. He had heard her voice on the stair, gently comforting a homesick first year. She had escorted a group of seventh years down to Transfiguration, explaining a tricky bit of Muggle legislation while all of them hung on her every word. She was honest and sincere, yet quite wily when dealing with the cunning Slytherins and their loaded questions. They never caught her out or found a chink in her armour.

He heard her greet Hagrid with a smile and a wave before challenging a group of third years to a quick race down to the Black Lake for their DADA lesson. Though she never caught sight of Severus that day, he was continually aware of her. Hermione had been a constant source of magical energy; kind, laughing, firm, quick, gutsy and inexhaustible. She was fresh and young and seemed to breathe new life into every part of the school. She radiated harmony, and it struck deep within Severus like a bell and stayed with him.

In time, the idea for the restaurant was realised, and Severus had enjoyed its success and taken pride in what he and Lucius had achieved. But Albus had been right; although it was a new beginning, it had not felt in any way as life-affirming as the afternoon he'd spent at Hogwarts, watching Hermione Granger radiating her warmth and charm throughout the castle he'd called home for so many years. He found himself longing for that warmth; like all growing things left so long in darkness, he longed for the sun.

Albus had been trying to tell him all along, and Severus hadn't wanted to believe it. His new beginning was waiting there at Hogwarts the whole time, and he could have it, if he would only screw his courage to the sticking place and do something about it.

Severus looked at his watch. It was 7:20. He stiffened his spine. *Well, lad, it took you two years, but better late than never. It's time. Let's do something about it.*

The Royal Albert Hall was buzzing with people, and in the soft evening light Hermione stood at the bottom step, looking around for Severus. It never occurred to her that he wouldn't show; a man like him always did what he said he would do.

It had also never occurred to her that he would be late, but as she looked at her watch, she knew he was perilously close to disproving that particular myth.

At 7:30 a young man approached her and gallantly presented her with a long-stemmed yellow rose. "Signorina Granger?" he asked in a heavy Italian accent. When she nodded, he said, "For you."

Bemused, Hermione took the flower from his hand. "Thank you," Hermione said, puzzled, "But why?"

He smiled, showing beautiful white teeth. "Ah, it was easy! You see, I was told to find the most beautiful woman standing in front of the Albert Hall and give her this flower!" He gave her a little bow and ran away, calling, "Buona sera, Signorina, Buona sera!"

Hermione smiled at him, and wished him a nice evening in return. She brought the flower to her nose and was immediately entranced by the fragrance. It was heady, and there was something familiar and welcoming about it. There was no doubt in her mind it was a magical rose, and Hermione hastily glanced around, looking for Severus.

At that moment, Hermione felt a tap on her shoulder, and an elderly gentleman handed her another rose. This one was a beautiful peach colour, and she could smell its sexy perfume from arm's length. The man bowed formally, and said, "A rose by any other name, Miss Granger," and he was off.

A minute later a young boy on a bicycle rode by with a red rose in his hand. He held it out like a relay racer passing a baton, and she plucked it from his fingers, laughing. "Enjoy the show!" he shouted as he rode off.

Another minute saw a black cab pull up onto the curb in front of her and cabby doffed his hat as he handed her his rose with an exaggerated flourish. This one a deep pink with the fragrance of strawberries. In a thick East London accent that would cut butter, he said, "A lovely flower, but not 'arf as lovely as you are, my dear!"

By now, she had attracted quite a crowd. For the next eight minutes, Hermione received a new rose, one for every passing minute, by a different stranger. As each additional rose was pressed into her hand and her multicoloured bouquet grew, she became more and more the center of attention. She was chatting with her fellow concert-goers, speculating what colour would be next. She had so far received red, yellow, pink, burgundy, peach, purple, cream, blue, fuchsia, coral and lilac roses, and their fragrance was as intoxicating and intricate as the blooms themselves.

At last, Hermione felt a large, warm hand on her shoulder and turned to see Severus holding out a white rose to her. She looked up at him, her face glowing in the soft luminous light. Hermione opened her mouth to say something, anything, but found she could not. Severus smiled. *He really is handsome when he smiles*, she thought, and when she took the final rose from him, he drawled, "Alas, I'd spent all afternoon trying to come up with an original idea. It seems all your admirers have beaten me to it."

To their mutual surprise, several people around them started applauding; then, sensing that the little pantomime was over, the patrons started meandering toward the doors of the Albert Hall, chatting away about the pretty young woman and her bouquet of roses.

Hermione took the white rose from Severus and finally found her voice. "That was...*the* most romantic thing that anyone's ever done for me."

He made a pained expression. "Please. Don't let the word get out. My reputation, you know."

She drew a negating "X" over her heart with her index finger, and looked at her bouquet. "And to think, all I did with my entire afternoon was buy this dress."

He looked smugly pleased. "Then the afternoon wasn't wasted. You look stunning." He looked down at her. "I'm going to be the envy of every man in the place tonight."

She looked around at the strangers smiling in her direction. "You're going to have a lot of those men in trouble tomorrow, you know. Their wives and their girlfriends will be asking, 'Why don't you ever do something that romantic for me?'"

He looked down at her, taking in her dress, her flowing hair, her radiant smile, and his stern face softened. "Perhaps it is because their wives and girlfriends aren't as special as you."

They started the long walk up the steps, arm in arm. Still smiling from his compliment, Hermione began, "You know, different-coloured roses have different meanings. Neville told me."

"I had no idea Mr. Longbottom was such an expert in florigraphy." Hermione listened for the expected sarcasm, but to her surprise, the statement carried no tone of malice. It was merely a response.

Emboldened, Hermione continued, "Yes, he's an Herbology professor now. He said that the flowers not only tell a story, but they let the giver send messages to the receiver." She recalled each with a little nod. "He told me red was for passion, pink was for gratitude, blue was for mystery, orange, to show pride and respect, yellow for renewed friendships -"

"Hermione," Severus interrupted smoothly, "I know what they mean." His voice was quiet, and insistent, but his eyes were kind. "I was the one who sent them, hmm? All that matters to me is that you know what they mean, my little know-it-all." His gentle hand at her waist took any sting out of his words. As they entered the great building, Hermione took a good look at her bouquet. Severus was speaking to her through the flowers, telling her what he wanted, what she meant to him - friendship, gratitude, passion, love and mystery.

But he himself had handed her the white rose. White, Neville had said, was the most significant rose of all. It stood for secrecy, new beginnings, for commitments - for the desire of the giver to be worthy of the recipient. Severus wanted to be worthy of her, and his desire for her had been a secret one, perhaps for a long time.

Hermione felt her heart swell. She thought she may have just fallen in love with Severus Snape.

Once inside, Severus gently took the bouquet from Hermione, surreptitiously cast a stasis charm, then shrank them and placed them in a little protective vial in his pocket. They found their box with a few moments to spare. As promised, they had the second-tier box to themselves, and as they settled in, Hermione felt they were in their own private world, away from prying eyes, both Muggle and Magical. Her heart began to beat a little faster. The idea of being alone in the dark with Severus was more thrilling than she would have ever imagined.

"What exactly are we listening to this evening?" he asked as he seated himself close at her side.

Hermione replied, "It's the Film Music Prom, so we'll be listening to music from all sorts of movies." She resisted the urge to nuzzle against him. "This is always my favourite prom of the season, because I usually recognise so many of the songs." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye and smiled shyly. "Then again, sometimes the tunes that aren't necessarily the most popular or the easiest to sing are the ones that you fall in love with, and can't get out of your head."

Severus looked at her intently, praying to Nimue that she was applying the metaphor of the century and not merely waxing poetic about her love for Half a Sixpence. "Then I feel doubly flattered that you invited me to share the evening with you." He squeezed her hand gratefully. "Would you excuse me for a moment, Hermione?"

Without further ado, Severus rose from his seat and swiftly disappeared through the curtain at the back of the box. Hermione sat back in her seat with a little puzzled frown. Just before the house lights darkened, Severus returned, seemingly Apparating to his seat. "Come with me," he said, pulling her to her feet. Grabbing their chairs, he nodded toward the curtain again.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked, but Severus ignored her question and opened the back curtain. Hermione stepped through and gasped. In reality, they should have been standing in the corridor that ran the circumference of the building, just outside the interior Hall itself.

The corridor was *gone*.

They were standing on what appeared to be a balcony, overlooking Kensington. The sky was red from all of the lights of the city. In the waning summer sun, The Albert Memorial's gold statues gleamed in the reflected light. The sky over London glowed fire-red in every direction, and the city twinkled beneath their feet as far as the eye could see. Sunset replaced city lights replaced sunset in a never-ending stream of light.

Stunned, Hermione realised that Severus had magically sectioned off this portion of the actual building from the rest and charmed it to reveal the outside beyond, much like the Great Hall at Hogwarts was charmed to reflect the sky. The noises of the city were faint, and from her vantage point she could see people walking toward them on the corridor, but as soon as they reached the area Severus had charmed, they paused, looked puzzled, then turned and went the other way. Severus had placed a Muggle-repelling charm around them.

"And a Muffliato, and a Notice-me-not spell," he answered, situating their seats to give them a panoramic view of Kensington and beyond. Hermione turned to him, awe-struck. From beyond the curtain, they could hear the strains of the orchestra tuning as clearly as if they were sitting indoors. A bucket of champagne was chilling on a table beside a Waterford crystal vase holding her dozen roses. Severus had thought of everything.

"This is... incredible," she marveled, as he handed her a frosty champagne flute. "This is an amazingly intricate and precise display of magic, Severus." She had never felt so humbled. No one had ever performed such magic simply to please her. She wanted to tell him so, but the suspicious lump in her throat seemed to be in the way. Finally, she managed, "Now I do feel like royalty! This is a beautiful dream."

Severus touched his glass to hers. "Here's to dreams coming true."

Hermione murmured, "Cheers," and sipped. She hummed appreciatively and smiled at Severus, who nodded approvingly.

"Not as good as... katmer, but still quite enjoyable." Hermione's heart was pounding as he took the glass from her hand and drew her into his arms. "I'm going out on a limb here," he said, and the playfulness of his voice was laced with uncertainty. For a moment, he simply gazed into her eyes, and his entire concentration seemed to distill down to one point: her. It was both thrilling and disconcerting to be examined so intently, and Hermione swallowed, and placed her hands against his chest.

Finally, he raised his hand and caressed her cheek with his long, slender fingers. "I would like to... to court you, Hermione. If you are agreeable."

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it. In that second, she realised he mistook her hesitancy for rejection. She felt his body stiffen, and made to pull away. "Perhaps I was mistaken." He stepped back, and Hermione found her voice and grabbed his lapels.

"Oy, you!" It was almost worth the misunderstanding to witness the look on his face.

"Excuse me?" he replied, rather stiffly.

Hermione pulled him to her. "I said, 'oy, you!'" She smiled, and pressed against him again. "Didn't anyone tell you I was the brightest witch of my age?"

His mouth twitched. "I seem to recall hearing it once or twice during my tenure at Hogwarts."

Hermione released his lapels. "Well, it just so happens that they were right. I am." She reached up and laced her fingers behind his head, and he cautiously placed his hands on her waist. "And I know I am, because only an idiot would say no to you. I, sir, am no idiot."

His eyes actually seemed to grow lighter, and his face relaxed. His voice was as warm as the night. "I'd heard as much." A look of almost pained longing crossed his features. "Merlin, Hermione, you are lovely."

"Funny that," she murmured. "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

He pulled her to him at last. His embrace felt like the dress she wore: perfect, comfortable, made for sin.

Hermione heard Severus mutter a transfiguration spell, and the hard chairs became a large, comfortable love seat, complete with ottoman. He took her hand and together they sat, nestled closely, looking out onto the burning London night, just in time to hear the opening strains of the theme music to 'Casablanca.'

For the next few songs, they listened, drank their champagne and talked. Really talked. Severus spoke of the restaurant and his plans for expansion; Hermione told him of her hopes for her career at Hogwarts. They talked of places they'd always wanted to visit; they spoke of their feelings for one another. They started the halting, stilted phrases of building a future together. It never occurred to them not to.

"Oh, this is a favourite song of mine!" Hermione smiled, as the orchestra started playing a soft, waltz-like piece. She closed her eyes and snuggled closer to Severus, and his arm tightened about her shoulders. She hummed along with the opening bars.

"I don't recognize it."

"It's from a film called 'Victor/Victoria.' My mum loves that film." She risked looking up at him, to find him watching her intently.

"Does it have words? Sing them."

It wasn't a request. It was a command. Hermione looked up at him, doubt in her eyes. "Are you sure? I usually only sing in the shower."

He tilted his head flirtatiously. "I'll have my wand at the ready in case the need for an additional Silencing Charm arises," he drawled, and pulled her closer. "Sing to me," he whispered in her hair, and she could feel his lips against her forehead.

With a pounding heart, Hermione closed her eyes and softly sang along to the orchestra.

"Crazy world, full of crazy contradictions, like a child;

First you drive me wild, and then you win my heart with your wicked art,

One moment tender, gentle,

Then temperamental like a summer's storm,

Just when I believe your heart's getting warmer,

You're cold, then you're cruel, and I, like a fool try to cope, try to hang on to hope.

Crazy world, every day the same old roller coaster ride,

But I've got my pride, I won't give in,

Even though I know I'll never win,

Oh, how I love this crazy world."

Hermione felt her eyes fill. Tears spilled traitorously from her eyes, and she pressed closer, trying to hide them.

Severus, sensing the change, gently cupped her cheek with his hand. "Here, now," he said, his voice soft and sweet as sin. "Why tears?" He brushed them from her cheeks.

"It's just that-" Hermione took a deep breath. She looked up at him with every ounce of her old Gryffindor courage and forthright personality, and told him the truth.

"It's just that everything you've done and said has been so perfect. I never want this night this-" She placed her hand on his cheek. "This moment. I never want it to end."

Severus looked down at her in wonder, and he turned her in his arms until she was facing him. "As long as you will have me, Hermione, it will never end." He gently kissed the tears from her cheeks, and as he mesmerized her with his fathomless eyes, he leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

His kiss was soft and gentle, and with each touch of his warm mouth, he pulled back and looked into her eyes searchingly. Each kiss lasted just that much longer, just that much deeper, until they were fused to one another, hungrily drawing their need and passion from one another's lips. When he finally pulled away from her, they were both gasping, eyes heavy-lidded and fiery. Severus crushed her to his body, and Hermione moaned with desire as he looked down on her like a predator, eager to devour her.

Silently she stood, their eyes locked. She kicked off her shoes and returned to him, sitting on his lap, straddling him. His hands slid up her silk stockings until they rested on her bare thighs, and she moved against him, closing her eyes as she felt his erection, bone-hard and hot, straining at his trousers.

He looked up at her and nodded, as if agreeing with some silent proclamation. In a voice low and gruff with arousal he growled, "I want you, Hermione. I want you now; I want you tomorrow, and every sodding day for the rest of my life. I have for a long time." He was shaking, as if standing with his back to a cold wind.

Hermione lowered her head and took his bottom lip between her teeth and bit gently. He whimpered and pulled her closer. She put her arms around him, and with her lips touching the baby-soft flesh of his earlobe, she whispered, "You'd better start working on your stamina, Severus Snape. It's going to be awhile before I'm through with you; say, the next one hundred years or so."

They kissed again, their passion hot and fierce, and Severus rewarded her with a dark, low moan as they began to grind against one another hungrily. His large hands cupped her breasts, and the thought of his long pale fingers on her nipples nearly melted Hermione into a puddle on his lap. He looked up at her, a question in his eyes. "Would you may I-" he stammered.

Feeling on fire, Hermione surged against him. "Say it, Severus, say it!" She smiled, feeling wild and wicked, and the idea that Severus Snape might just say something filthy was almost enough to make her knickers burst into flames.

He looked up at her, his face curiously blank, almost innocently lustful. His breath shuddered from him, and his suave voice was reduced to a moaning whisper. "Hermione, oh, witch..." He gave her a look that made her tremble. With a coy look, she delicately touched her fingers to the red fabric of her neckline. He rasped lewdly, "That's it. Show them to me."

Hermione closed her eyes as she dropped the shoulders of her dress and eased herself from the garment. He gazed down on her in wonder, a crooked smile spreading slowly across his angular face. He flicked his eyes up to meet hers, and something of his old sneer teased at his lips. She gasped as he cupped her breasts; in his pale hands they looked creamy and luminescent in the blazing light. "Perfect," he purred, lowering his mouth to her nipple. "Perfect," he echoed, as his tongue flicked over the peach-coloured flesh.

He devoured her like ripened fruit, and she arched her back and mewled her pleasure. His long fingers teased and plucked as his mouth nipped and suckled at the sensitive, tender flesh. Hermione moaned, "I hate to sound like a randy teenager, but I don't think I can wait until we get back to my hotel tonight."

"You seem to be under a false assumption you're going to make it back to your hotel tonight, witch," Severus growled, and grasped the back of her neck, pulling her down into a kiss so blistering in its passion and inflammatory in its heat that it rivaled the sun. He sucked her tongue into his mouth to do battle with his own, and she answered his throaty cry with a feral moan all her own, until she was breathless and gasping against him.

Finally breaking the kiss, he panted, "Have you ever -" He looked up at her carefully. Almost apologetically, he asked, "Are you a virgin, love?"

Hermione, shaking with need and almost deranged with lust, shook her head quickly. "No. I mean, I'm not the most experienced witch in the world but no, I'm not. A virgin, I mean." She laughed shortly. "Though lately it's just been me and my trusty number fourteen most of the time."

He stilled. "Number fourteen?" he asked, eyebrow on the rise, his hands stroking her back.

Hermione swallowed. "It's my..." She hesitated then rushed forward. "Oh hell, why be coy? It's my vibrator."

Severus' eyes grew wide. "Oh, I see." He said it as though he saw things very well. "And what happened to the first thirteen?" He smiled a slow, hot smile that made wonderful things happen between Hermione's thighs. She grinned in return.

"I must've worn them out," she said flirtatiously, then moaned when he thrust his erection against her sodden knickers.

"Perhaps you could give me a demonstration sometime?" His eyes raked over her salaciously as she undulated on his lap. "Just you and your... number fourteen."

"Well," she smiled, "I did happen to bring it with me to London."

Severus sneered and uttered a short, barking laugh. "Perhaps we might have to make a detour back to that hotel after all."

Hermione was panting now. "You can help me demonstrate it. Look, Severus, I'm enjoying this playful banter and all, but if you don't unbutton your trousers soon and do something about this fire you've put in my belly I think I'll go spare."

Severus lifted her up. "I agree. Small talk is over," he commanded, his whisper urgent and sweet. Hermione covered his face in kisses, sucking his tongue into her mouth, moaning feverishly as she silently cast the spell to send their clothing onto the table beside the roses.

They both hissed pleurably, feeling the cool night air kissing their skin, the first intimate touch of their bodies. It was daunting and exciting at once; looking around, Hermione felt like an exhibitionist, even though she knew they were invisible.

She could feel his cock, blazingly hot, teasing at the entrance of her dripping pussy, and knew that they would have to experience foreplay some other time in the next future, perhaps later in the evening. Possibly with number fourteen. It didn't seem too important now.

His hands gripped her thighs, holding her over his straining cock, poised at her entrance. "Look at me," he whispered, his voice all silk and velvet and boundless eroticism. "Look at me when I -" but his own eyes closed against his will, and they both cried out as she slid sweetly home. "Oh, Merlin, oh *fuck*," he breathed helplessly, and Hermione shuddered at the naked, raw vulnerability in his voice. It suddenly became her life's ambition to hear it again.

"Gods, Severus, it's so good," Hermione whimpered, transfigured by the exquisite pleasure of this wizard filling her fully, making her his witch. She felt as light as a feather, and when she raised her body and he pistoned his hips up to meet hers with that first cleaving thrust, Hermione thought she might die of fulfillment.

They soon found their rhythm and began their dance. It was hard and sweet; his hands were everywhere, caressing her face, stroking her breasts, cupping her bottom, pulling her down onto his cock, teasing her with his long fingers. Hermione felt her body tensing, and she looked into his pale face, transported with pleasure.

Their movements became erratic and they held onto one another desperately as their pleasure overwhelmed and augmented them. Severus' hand drifted between them, and as his thumb found the hard little button of her clitoris and pressed against it, Hermione's climax took her breath away. She cried out his name into the blazing sky, shuddering with the intensity of the sensations he had created.

He slowed his thrusts, his urgent fingers. His eyes burning into hers, as she slowly came back to her senses. He was looking up at her with something akin to wonder. "That was amazing," he breathed.

Hermione kissed him hungrily, feeling powerful and drugged with lust. "I'll show you amazing, Severus Snape. Lose yourself," she commanded huskily, barely aware of what she was saying. "I need to see you lose control. I want to make you come. I want to hear you scream." He closed his eyes and an expression of something akin to gratitude softened his angular features. He began slowly, a burning, rocking thrust, rotating and churning his hips as he rose against her. It was glorious, and all the more so because they both knew how brief this slow seduction would be; their bodies would soon succumb as need overtook desire.

Their movements grew faster, harder and deeper. Severus wrapped his long arms around her waist and began to drive hard upward, levering upward with his thighs. He laid his head back against the chair, looking up into her face with eyes glazed with pleasure. He was open and so abandoned he looked like a boy again. There was a vulnerability to his expression that excited Hermione unbearably, and she muscles clenched around him as he surrendered himself to the rapture of burying his flesh within hers, pounding into her, giving her and giving in to ecstasy that was tearing him apart...

"Gods, Hermione," he whimpered briefly, looking up into her face. "Beautiful... oh, gods, girl... I'm coming... Come with me!" His eyes rolled back, and the look of almost painful pleasure and delight on his face sent Hermione careening into her orgasm, and she screamed into the night, his broken voice calling her name its only counterpoint. Over and over he rasped out her name, punctuating each climaxing thrust, until he was spent and dazed, her name on his lips like a final benediction. Hermione collapsed against him, breathless and drained, and Severus trembled as his spent member slid from her body. He still held onto her fiercely, as if afraid she would fly away the moment he relaxed his grip.

For a moment, neither spoke; no words would suffice. Finally, they looked at one another, and smiled, then laughed. It was a tender sort of laughter, and it held the promise of more to come. "I think," Hermione whispered breathlessly, as she pressed her cheek to his, "you've just rendered number fourteen obsolete."

His laughter was a delicious, deep sound that made Hermione squirm delightedly and snuggle closer into his arms. "I suppose I shall have to deed pole my middle name from Tobias to Fifteen, then. Ah, well, the things we do for love."

The music drifted in from the Hall as they continued to hold and explore one another. Then, overtaken with exhaustion, she curled up next to him and dozed, a sweet sleep of love and champagne and roses and music...

She awoke to the smell of breakfast. She found herself lying in a huge four-poster bed in a well-lit, airy bedroom she didn't recognise. The events of the past twenty-four hours flooded back into her mind, and she allowed herself a complacent stretch, just as the door opened, and Severus entered the room, levitating a tray heaped with food. *Roses, champagne, great sex AND breakfast in bed*, Hermione thought. *Yep, I'm in love.*

"I wasn't sure if you still enjoyed a Full English like you did in your school days, but if you don't like anything here, I'm sure I can rustle up some katmer," he said by way of greeting. He sat beside her on the bed and took her in his arms. He looked rumpled and rested and rather pleased with himself. Hermione thought he looked perfect. His stubble rasped against her face in a very welcome fashion. "Good morning, Hermione."

"Good morning," she replied, and kissed his lips. They were soft and warm, and flavoured with coffee. "And breakfast looks divine." She drew back and favoured him with a puzzled frown. "And how did you know I loved big boy's breakfasts in school?"

He rolled his eyes and placed a careless kiss on her forehead. He speared a forkful of scrambled eggs and held it toward her mouth. "Open up." Obediently, Hermione accepted the food, and as she ate, he replied, "I did eat breakfast at the same time as you for almost seven straight years. I'm not the most unobservant of men."

"True, but you may well be the sexiest," Hermione conceded, grabbing a piece of bacon and offering it to him. He licked her fingertips as he took the bacon into his mouth, his onyx eyes never leaving hers. Hermione felt her body responding in almost Pavlovian fashion. "I rest my case."

After they fed one another, Severus climbed back into bed with Hermione, and they lay quietly touching, stroking one another. "You do realise we missed another dinner

reservation, don't you?" He lay back, and pulled her into his arms. "My maître d' Joffrey is probably in St. Mungo's by now."

"Oh, dear," Hermione commiserated. She was running her fingertips over his pale body, exploring her wizard, her hand drifting down to his belly. He made a delicious little rumbling sound as her fingers slid over his very interested cock. "Perhaps we could go early this afternoon and stay through luncheon and dinner. You know," she added, giving his cock a firm, deep stroke, "to make up for lost time?"

He rolled her in his arms until she was nestled beneath him. Long fingers found her nipple as hard and ready for him as his cock was for her. "I think making up for lost time is going to be a priority for us both in the foreseeable future."

The next afternoon, Severus Floo'd directly into Minerva McGonagall's office. The Headmistress was shockingly unsurprised to see him.

"Hello, my boy," she cried happily, and Severus accepted her motherly embrace with an air of resignation that fooled neither of them. "Now, tell me you've come with the news I want to hear."

He smirked. With an exaggerated sigh, he drawled, "Yes, Minerva, I will agree to return as Potions master. For the time being."

"Excellent! No conflicts with the restaurant, then?"

Severus shook his head. "It's doing well enough to leave in Joffrey's hands."

"Joffrey?"

"My maître d'. He already thinks he owns the place. He and Lucius have offered to take over the day-to-day matters."

Minerva nodded. "Well, that is a relief." She rewarded Severus with a grateful smile. "It will be like old times."

"Merlin, I fucking hope not!" Severus declared with a shudder. Then he fixed a baleful eye on Minerva. "I do have conditions."

Minerva tilted her head, as if expecting as much. "Name them, Severus. I'm sure we can accommodate you." She offered him a seat, and a house-elf appeared with tea fittings.

"Firstly, I will only commit for a year. After that, we can renegotiate."

She nodded, pouring them both a cup of tea. "I see no problem in that. Anything else?" She laced her tea with whiskey, and offered him the bottle.

As he added the spirits to his tea, Severus continued. "I wish to return to my position as Head of Slytherin House. And I will eventually require larger quarters." He said the last words with such deceptive smoothness that anyone other than Minerva would not have heard the unspoken reason.

She nodded, her smile brightening. "I was hoping that was the reason for Professor Granger's behaviour when she returned to the castle last night. She danced down the halls to her quarters, singing something about a crazy world." Severus looked away, but Minerva knew him well enough to know he was pleased about it. Softly, she asked, "Have you told her?"

"I will when we are done here. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure we could come to a suitable arrangement for both of us. All of us." He sobered. "Are you sure about this, Min? It's been a long time, but people don't forget I was the most hated teacher here."

"No, they don't forget." They turned at the sound of Albus Dumbledore's voice. The portrait smiled down upon them. "But you were also one of the best. Welcome back, my boy," he replied, with a twinkle. "Hogwarts has missed you."

Hermione looked up as Severus walked into the Great Hall, and the students had a good, long look at him. He didn't notice them at all. He only had eyes for Hermione. As he strode toward the Head table, her smile grew bigger and more welcoming with every step. It was nothing compared to the look of absolute delight when Minerva introduced him as next term's Potions professor.

He took his seat beside her, and to everyone's stunned surprise, brought her hand to his lips and kissed it, his eyes never leaving hers. She was practically glowing. On impulse, he leaned over and touched his lips to her silken cheek. Once again, Severus ignored the collective gasp of the teachers at the table. He no longer cared about the opinions of others. It was breathtakingly liberating.

It had taken him too long to work up the courage to even re-introduce himself to the witch. Now he couldn't imagine spending another day without her. Something in Hermione's loving expression told him that, if she had anything to do with it, he wouldn't have to.

~Mischief Managed~