

Falling

by *anoesis*

The Department of Mysteries has its own set of entrance criteria, but as Hermione is about to discover, it's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 9

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Severus rolled over and glanced at the clock. It was almost eleven o'clock and he was still in bed. *When had that happened?* When had the tightly wound, caffeine and potions driven spy become the sort of man that had lie-ins nearly every day of the week?

Since the end of the war made tightly wound spies obsolete, that's when. Since compensation, pensions and guilt money made it unnecessary to work. Since killing one former employer and betraying the other rather spectacularly had made it almost impossible to *find* work.

He had thought that peace would mean freedom. When he had come to in St Mungo's, surrounded by flowers and cards from well-wishers, Severus had foolishly believed he had been given a second chance at life. His Dark Mark had faded; his Dark Lord was dead. The guilt-ridden memories of Lily that had driven him for so long were missing. Even his remorse over sending Lily's son to his inevitable death had crumbled when he learned that the Boy Who Lived had survived the Killing Curse once again.

Yet freedom, or whatever *this* was, had its own cost.

All those who had been so glad to see him live made it clear they wanted no part in his new life. It was much easier to be grateful to someone when you weren't continually reminded of your debt. With Hogwarts closed to him, there was no place for Severus in the new world. His role in the war had already been made public knowledge and discussed. After that, he had somehow ceased to exist in any way that really mattered.

Most people would easily have accepted that he would welcome a reclusive lifestyle, but Severus wasn't made to be idle. His father might not have won any parenting awards, but he had instilled in Severus a conscientious work ethic. A large part of Tobias Snape's biggest gripe with magic was the fact that it just seemed so lazy to him, so *unearned*. It wasn't good people who were granted magic; it could manifest itself in anyone. A staunch socialist, it was as unfair in his opinion as inherited wealth. While Severus may not have agreed with his father, he had worked every day since he had left school. This prolonged, enforced idleness was the worst part of his retirement and compounded the loneliness that came with having outlived one's usefulness.

There had been a time, once, when the thought of a whole morning spent in bed had sounded like a ridiculous indulgence. Maybe if there had been someone to share these idle mornings with, they might have been welcome. Now they just highlighted one simple fact he had nothing better to do.

Refusing to allow his maudlin thoughts to turn a lazy morning into an entire day under the covers, Severus pushed back the duvet and climbed to his feet.

As Hermione queued at the International Floo and Portkey Terminal, waiting to be processed, she could already feel the damp British air working its way through the careful charms controlling her hair.

International journeys always left her feeling tired and travel stained, even though the longest journey could be completed in a fraction of the time it would take by Muggle means. The queuing for 'Keys, the interminable paperwork, the invasive lights of the Sneakoscopes it all conspired to give her a pounding headache and left her feeling like she needed a long, hot bath.

Not that she had time for such creature comforts. There had been a delay in Bali and, by the time she was finally processed, there was only time enough to freshen up in the Ministry toilets before her interview.

Hermione washed her face and hands thoroughly, chewed on a Toothflossing Stringmint for exactly one hundred and twenty seconds, and spritzed herself with her favourite perfume before taking careful stock of herself in the thankfully silent mirror.

She looked neat enough, she supposed, if ever so slightly flustered. The time away had left her with only a light tan, but her skin seemed almost olive under the bright lights. Her dark blue robes were severe in cut, but the sharp tailoring complemented the softness of her face and hair, and the overall effect was rather pleasing. She looked smart, efficient, and just a fraction exotic a world away from the frightened school girl who had once landed on the pavement outside the Ministry on an invisible Thestral. Almost like she might belong in the Department of Mysteries these days.

She only hoped her interviewer, Agent Smith, might think so, too.

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Bartleby Smith was waiting for her as she exited the lifts on Level Nine, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. Hermione checked her watch discreetly, wondering if she was late, but she was precisely five minutes early.

Smith, who had to be at least five years younger than Hermione, bounded forward the moment he saw her, hand outstretched.

"Hermione Granger? I knew it had to be you! We don't get many witches younger than sixty in these hallowed halls." He shook her hand enthusiastically. "You know, you're a lot prettier than you look in the history books," he continued, blinking. "Anyway, there's lots to see. This way!"

He led the way down the dimly lit corridor to the black door at the end, and Hermione found herself scampering to keep up. Any hope of appearing exotic and aloof vanished as she found herself trailing behind Smith like a puppy.

"Of course I know all about the previous trip here. Well, it was impossible to keep it a secret once the press got hold of the pictures." He leant against the door, opening it easily. "Messy business, that."

The space beyond the door was just as Hermione remembered: a round room with doors leading off like the markers on a sundial.

"Creepy, isn't it?" Bartleby smiled, allowing the door to swing closed behind him.

In that moment, Hermione was fifteen again, plunged into a world far darker than she had ever imagined. "No!" She held out a hand to grab at the door, but her fingers met the whirring rush as the doors began to spin. The torches flared, dimmed, then flared again, reflecting off the shiny floor and leaving her purblind.

Refusing to embarrass herself by clinging to her interviewer and bursting into tears, Hermione breathed carefully through her nose, hands clenched into tight fists by her sides, until her vision cleared.

When it did, Bartleby was still smiling happily, apparently oblivious to the panic he had just caused.

"Care to pick?" He gestured to the handleless doors surrounding them. "No? Oh well, we'll try this one."

The space beyond was dark, but it had none of the grandeur that had marked the rooms that she had visited as a child. Loose gravel crunched underfoot and the walls were lit by torches. The ceiling was low and the air damp. Hermione had the feeling that she was deep underground.

"The Department of Mysteries is older than the Ministry building itself." Bartleby explained as he led her down into the dark. "The Ministry used to be based in Winchester until it became apparent that London was going to become the financial centre. They followed the gold well, they followed the Goblins, but *they* followed the gold, and the main building was created. This was originally catacombs. The Ministry building doesn't quite align with this one sometimes you can feel the shift when you step through the door. It makes it easy to close access between the two stops any disruptive magic from spilling over into the rest of the Ministry."

Bartleby, Hermione decided, was very much a more loquacious version of Percy Weasley. Perhaps what Dennis Creavy might have become had he been allowed to live to adulthood. He led her through the catacombs into a more modern area with whitewashed brick walls and stark lighting, his endless chatter as dizzying as the twisted path they followed.

The catacombs seemed almost endless. At times, even Hermione was forced to bend almost double as they made their way

"Much of what visitors are allowed to see is just for show. As if we'd keep all our research in an area that was easily accessible by someone without the proper clearance! However, there are still some fascinating things to see. For example, this is where some of our more esoteric experiments take place. Let's see if anyone is free for a chat..."

Ducking through a low door, Hermione found herself in a very bland looking office crammed with nineteen-sixties looking furniture. There were several low desks littered with yoghurt pots of various sizes. A tired old gramophone was blasting out something that sounded to Hermione's untutored ear suspiciously like Barry White. An old man in nondescript black robes was poking at the pots with his wand and scribbling notes in a floating notepad.

"Bob? This is Hermione. I'm just showing her the ropes. Can you tell us what you're working on?"

Bob frowned at the interruption, but seemed happy enough to talk about his research for a man who worked behind seventeen layers of warding Hermione had counted them as Bartleby had waved each of them aside. "We're currently trying to determine why ordinary Muggle custard becomes animate when subjected to low frequency sound," he announced, gesturing to the pots around him. Looking closely, Hermione could see that the ones nearer the 'phone were already wagging little yellow fingers in time with the beat.

"Oh," Hermione answered when she realised that Bob was expecting a response, then tried to think of something intelligent to say. "Just custard or non-Newtonian liquids in general?"

Bob froze. "There are other liquids like this?"

"Um... I think it depends on starch levels or something. Proper custard made with eggs won't react in the same way."

Bob stared at her levelly for ten long seconds.

"Hmm," he stated finally. "Of course, we'd have to check that theory. Smith, get me everything she knows on non-newt-only-one liquids before she's assigned." He pursed his lips. "Just in case."

"Just in case?" Hermione repeated, but Bartleby was already rushing from the room, talking happily over his shoulder.

By the time they made it to the upper levels back through another fifteen layers of warding, Hermione was exhausted, both from hurrying to keep up with her guide's long-legged strides and from trying to follow the almost endless stream of highly confidential chatter she was subjected to throughout.

The last room he showed her was fairly small, with a curved desk, empty book shelves and a squidgy looking office chair that just begged to be curled up in.

"This will be your office. I can't yet tell you what you'll be doing, but you won't get the chance to do fieldwork until you've got a couple of months under your belt. Once you start, you'll soon find out that many of the Mysteries aren't really that mysterious." He considered. "Well, there may be about five topics that may cause your brain to go a bit squishy, but for the most part it's custard, alternate realities and unicorn blood." He looked up. "I was kidding about the unicorn blood. Most of the useful experiments concerning that were exhausted back in the sixties."

Hermione paused. "You're offering me the job? But I thought there would be a selection process? Rigorous interviews?"

"We only say that to discourage those who aren't certain about applying and to add to the general air of mystery. No, we've already got a good idea of who you are, what you can do and the sort of results we can expect from you. You've been a Person of Interest since you were twelve. Hardworking, bright, at your best when working towards a cause. Bit of a follower, but able to take risks when the situation demands it. There's just the matter of the trial."

Hermione, still shrivelling inside at the thought of being classed as a *bit of a follower*, almost missed the last bit. "The trial?"

"Hmm? Yes, it's customary for anyone wishing to obtain the freedom of the catacombs to pass some sort of test. Years ago it would be killing a dragon or something like that, but we're much more modern about it these days. Might be wrestling a troll, subduing a Boggart; it depends on the applicant. If you follow me through here..."

"Wait!" she called, following. "I didn't know I had to prepare for a trial! What if I fail?"

"Then we start the recruitment process again. Oh, and we'd have to Obliviate the bits I've mentioned about catacombs, dragons and whatnots." He frowned. "Bob might be upset if he can't ask you about the custard. Still, Clarence from the archives is Muggle born... maybe he knows about it."

Again, Hermione was forced to hurry to keep up with him. The floor evened out until they were walking on what felt like industrial issue concrete, and the walls were the uniform magnolia of civil service the world over. The doors they passed here were unadorned wood, their slit windows filled with wire-meshed safety glass, the like of which Hermione hadn't seen since primary school. It was incredibly ordinary, right down or should that be up to the strip lighting overhead.

The last door on the left opened into what felt like a waiting room-cum-reception. There was a long wooden counter running down one side, and a few metal framed low chairs sat against the opposite wall. A rather glamorous looking woman with an eighties perm was rummaging in a filing cabinet as they entered; seeing Bartleby and his companion, she closed the drawer and came forward to shake hands.

"Ah, Hilary! This is Miss Granger. She might be joining us shortly, but we just need to get her set up for the entrance exam running gag, I'm afraid. We used to have something similar to the Sorting Hat, but it turned out to be teensiest bit prejudiced, so we've moved with the times and invested in the Device here instead." He led her past the desk to the large thing that dominated the far wall.

Hermione only had the vaguest idea of what Steampunk was meant to be, but she had a feeling that the Device would be any aficionado's wet dream. Caught somewhere between a nineteen forties computer, the contents of an old lady's handbag, and a Russian samovar, it towered above her, making a soft huffing noise reminiscent of the Hogwarts Express.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Smith sighed. "Magic and technology in close alignment. We're hoping she'll help us make massive inroads into Quadrithmancy." He paused. "But that's something else I can't tell you about until you pass the test. Hilary?"

"It's nothing to worry about," Hilary explained as she opened a small hatch, about the size of a letter box, just below a row of dials. "Put your hand in here, please."

Hermione hesitated then thrust her hand through the narrow slit, expecting something horrible, and determined not to scream when she found out what.

Nothing happened.

After another five seconds of nothing happening, there was a distant ping, making Hermione jump.

"That's lovely, thanks." Hilary smiled, gesturing for her to remove her hand. There was a whirring, clacking noise from somewhere within the Device, then a small piece of paper dropped into a little brass tray by her elbow. "Ah yes, your personal challenge is to learn how to fly."

"Oh, jolly good!" Smith exclaimed. "Thank you as always, Hilary. We'll see you back here this time next week, shall we, Miss Granger? There's no strict timeframe for completing a trial, but we don't want that office getting dusty now, do we?"

And, just like that, her interview was over. Hermione was hustled out of the door and into the round room with its spinning walls. She'd been expecting the ugly corridor from before, but she was a little too overwhelmed to be thinking objectively.

Hermione reached out and pushed at the first door she reached. It opened at the lightest touch, spilling her out onto a dim corridor. Her ears popped as she looked up and saw the brightly lit lift at the far end, beckoning her back to the comparative normality of the Ministry of Magic.

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Hilary waited until the slightly clammy looking applicant had staggered from the room before turning to the Interviewer and offering a cup of tea. "She seems nice," she murmured, retrieving the Rich Teas from the biscuit drawer.

"Very nice," Smith agreed. "Bit quiet seeming, for a war heroine. She noticed all the wards, though, even if she did miss the runes on the lintels."

Hilary arranged the biscuits on a plate then, in a sudden fit of generosity, added a couple of Pink Wafers. Interviewing was as tough on the Interviewer as it was on the applicant, and poor Smith would have been burning through magic like it was Butterbeer since the girl had arrived.

They sat in companionable silence, broken only by the occasional slurp of tea. Hilary was just about to reach for the pot for a refill when a thought occurred to her. "Don't they teach flying at Hogwarts?"

Smith shrugged. "There'll be a story there somewhere." He reached for the last biscuit and dunked it absently in his tea. "There always is."

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 9

It's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

Sometimes it was the little things that brought the most comfort. Hermione chewed mechanically on another Stringmint as she tried to process what had just happened, counting to one hundred and twenty in time with her steadying pulse. The face that stared back at her from the mirrored doors of the lift was nothing like the put together young woman who had arrived only an hour before. No amount of tan could hide the fact that underneath, she was now a sickly greenish-white.

The lift shuddered to a stop, and Hermione stumbled out into the busy Atrium, only to be nearly knocked off her feet by a tornado dressed in Aurors' robes. She swallowed reflexively, wincing as the sensation of minty freshness spread down her oesophagus, and glared at her overwhelmingly familiar assailant.

"Harry!" she cried, throwing her arms around him, already feeling some of the interview-induced tension leave her as he returned her hug. She had almost forgotten her promise to meet him. "Is it lunch time already?"

"Hello, Hermione!" He grinned. Harry wore sensible, wire-rimmed glasses these days, but when he grinned he could easily have been eleven once more. "It's almost one o'clock. I thought you weren't going to turn up. Trouble with the 'Keys'?"

"I'll tell you all about it over lunch," Hermione replied, unable to keep the answering grin from her face. "That's if we still have time?"

"Don't worry." He smiled as they strolled through the Atrium. In her heels, they were almost exactly the same height, and she matched his stride easily. "I've taken off some owed hours. I wasn't going to rush this for anything. It's been two whole years since I saw you last. God, you look different! I take it Australia agrees with you?"

"Solomon Islands, actually," Hermione couldn't help but correct, "but yes, I loved it out there!"

Auror Potter raised an eyebrow. "Loved?"

"This isn't just a short visit," she explained. "Well, hopefully not. I've had a job interview with the Ministry. If I get it, I might be coming home for good."

"An interview?" This Harry might look just the same, Hermione decided, but there was a seriousness to him that she hadn't known before. This was how his co-workers must see him, she realised a professional man, not a little boy desperately trying to do the right thing. "Which department?"

"I can't say," Hermione realised. "That sneak! I didn't sign a thing!"

"Mysteries, eh?" Harry chuckled. "Ron owes me five Galleons. He thought it would be Archiving that called you back. I can't wait to have you home for good. We'll be able to have lunch together every day!"

"Maybe." Hermione sighed. Harry's enthusiasm was catching, but it couldn't stop her wondering just how on earth she was ever going to pass the Department of Mysteries' silly test. Then it occurred to her that she was talking to a renowned Quidditch player who just happened to be one of her best friends, and she felt a sudden spark of hope. "I might need your help with that."

"Of course," Harry agreed happily. "Now how about we collect Ron and find something to eat, eh?"

Hermione was about to reply when she became aware of a momentary chill prickling across her shoulders. Looking up, she saw a disturbingly familiar figure in black robes stalk past them with almost predatory grace.

"Is that...?"

"Keep walking." Harry caught her elbow and steered towards the Floos. "That is one conversation I want to avoid if I can help it."

Perplexed, Hermione let herself be steered from the Atrium and through the spinning green flames.

The Atrium was busy with workers returning from lunch breaks. Severus swept through the crowd and down to the lower floor, passing a couple cuddling by the lifts.

Smith was waiting for him. Severus had long ago learnt to expect almost Dumbledorian omniscience from the Interviewer and was no longer fazed by it.

"Back so soon, Mr Snape? Have you completed your task already?"

"You know that I haven't, Smith. I'm here for a retry."

"That's the spirit," commended Smith, whom Severus best remembered as an overly inquisitive little Hufflepuff. The boy had been one of the unfortunate few to earn a punishment from the Carrows that Severus had been unable to mitigate to something less harsh. Oddly, the round of Crucio had done nothing to break the boy, leaving him instead with an almost insatiable curiosity and resilience when it came to Dark magic. Severus hadn't liked to ask the boy what it was he specialised in for the DoM. "Follow me."

Hilary was sitting at her desk, typing up a report when they entered. She waved towards the Device without missing a stroke on her antiquated keyboard. "You know how it works by now; help yourselves."

Severus placed his hand in the opening, wondering, as always, if something unpleasant was going to happen. There was a clicking, whirring sound before a slip of paper was spat out into the tray.

Severus picked it up and read the single word in old fashioned typeface. "Oh, for fuck's sake!"

"Same again?" Smith queried. "Well, these tasks are intended to try you." He didn't seem the least put off by the look Severus gave him. Still, Crucio was known to addle the brain. "Nothing the Device asks for is impossible, though. I'm sure you'll find a way."

Hermione had wondered if seeing Ron again might be awkward, but she knew from the moment he gathered her up into a hug of almost Hagridesque proportions, that all was forgiven. Hermione hugged back happily, remembering a time when all three of them had been uncomfortable with showing physical affection and grateful it hadn't lasted. No matter how long they spent apart, being with Ron and Harry felt far more like coming home than anything else so far.

Stepping back, she looked up at the boy she had once dreamed of marrying. Unlike Harry, Ron had been busy at work during her previous visits back to the UK, and the five years apart had seen him lose the gangly look that coloured most of her memories. His shoulders and chest had finally caught up with his long legs, and he had let his hair grow out a little, which, combined with his easy smile and smiling blue eyes, gave him a handsome, almost roguish air.

Hermione felt a momentary tweak in her chest as she smiled back. This handsome, happy man had been hers once, and might still have been if only things had gone differently. Then he began explaining recent sales patterns to her with as much enthusiasm as he used to describe Quidditch, and Hermione felt the odd feeling pass.

Both the boys seemed so happy to see her, so comfortable with her back in their midst, that Hermione began to believe that she might have a real life waiting for her back in the UK, even if her parents were to remain overseas. Leaving her current friends and colleagues would be a wrench, but it wasn't as if she'd be setting out on her own. She'd be coming home.

Muggle London was crowded as ever and Hermione followed the boys happily, quietly amused at how comfortable they seemed amongst the crowds. It was fascinating to watch Ron cross a road without risking his life or see Harry dodge the charity workers with their clipboards.

"It's not that I don't care about puppies and orphans," he sighed as they reached the restaurant and ducked inside. "But they always want your bank details. They think you're taking the piss if you mention Gringotts."

"You need a Muggle bank account, mate," Ron advised. "What?" he asked defensively, noticing the look on Hermione's face. "I needed one if I was going to get the Sky sports channels."

Hermione shook her head and gestured at the high bar stools and colourful plates of food constantly moving along a tiny conveyor belt. "Sushi? You eat sushi now?"

"Hey, I live in London now, not the wilds of south Devon! Besides, it was either this or the Afghan restaurant by George's flat, but Harry normally only gets an hour for lunch and this is quicker."

"But raw fish?"

"Oh, I won't touch sashimi, but they do the most amazing little plates of katsu chicken."

Just when Hermione was wondering if he had changed beyond all recognition, Harry put her mind to rest.

"Here," he explained, "Ron gets to take food from every plate on the table, and no one can tell him off."

Finding three stalls together in a little corner counter, they ordered their drinks and began the serious business of catching up.

It was, Hermione realised, perhaps the first time they had ever done this properly. Every time they had gone to Hogsmeade together, there had been little time for sitting in a cosy corner of the Three Broomsticks, sipping Butterbeer. No matter how mundane their intentions, there had always been some drama about to unfold. She wondered idly what life might have been like for them should things have been different at school. Would she have been able to return from a career overseas and simply pick up her place in the trio had there not been a time when they had proven their willingness to walk into danger's path on each other's behalf?

She took a sip of her beer sake being too much of a challenge for lunch time and enjoyed a moment of complete contentment. All this was waiting for her to return to. She just had to pass one little test and all of it could be hers again. Which reminded her:

"Harry, was that really Professor Snape we passed in the Ministry?"

Ron looked up. "Is he still hanging around, mate?" he asked around a mouthful of chili squid.

Hermione looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

"Snape's been hanging around the Ministry lately, acting all weird," Harry explained, before leaning forward and pitching his voice low. "He actually offered to talk to me about my mother."

Hermione frowned. "And you *don't* want to?"

"I'm dying to!" Harry whined. "But if Auror training has taught me anything, it's that if something is too good to be true, then it probably is, and that there's no such thing as a free lunch."

"Horrible mixed aphorisms aside, that's some very sage advice," Hermione concurred, rubbing her fingers on her napkin. "Now, seeing as I've fed you lunch, I have a request for you."

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The paddock behind the Burrow was the de facto Quidditch pitch of Ottery St Catchpole. Hermione had attempted a few games there herself when she had been younger, and trying to impress boys had still been an acceptable pursuit. Once Ron's teenaged indifference had been established, Hermione had felt free to quit torturing herself over her lack of airborne athleticism and admit that she was far more comfortable at ground level, preferably with a good book or an even better film.

Somehow the Department of Mysteries had stumbled across the one thing she just couldn't do, even it appeared, with Harry Potter as her instructor.

At first, she had wondered if it was the old Cleansweep she was using. Spells could weaken over time or perhaps brooms, like chess sets, became accustomed to their owner and wouldn't work in quite the same way for anyone else.

Harry had almost been forced to concur she might have a point, until he had made the ultimate sacrifice, and allowed her to try his brand new Zephyr 3.0, at which point all her careful arguments fell apart.

Tired, sweaty and with that gnawing anxiety Hermione had come to associate with Muggle driving lessons, she had yet to make it more than three feet above the ground.

"It's no good, Harry. It just won't stop jolting."

"You're overcompensating," Harry repeated for the umpteenth time. "Stop flinching and it will stop trying to correct you."

"Why is it trying to correct me? I'm the one who doesn't want to fall off!"

She was embarrassingly close to tears when Harry finally allowed her to stop "Face it, Hermione, no one can be good at everything. Why are you so keen to learn? We had six years at Hogwarts when you could have tried, but you've never shown the least bit of interest. Why is it suddenly so important?"

"I can't tell you," Hermione sighed. "But if I can't learn, then you'll never have to worry about me not being able to tell you things again."

"I'm fairly certain it's not meant to be that easy to circumvent Secrecy Charms." Harry grinned. "So, they've given you a test to fulfil before you can join, eh? I wondered if that might be the case. And flying? That's a bit harsh."

"Harry, stop speculating! You're making my insides feel all squishy." Hermione grimaced, holding her hand to her chest. *This was just a quick charm flicked at her when she wasn't looking. What would a full Secrecy Oath feel like?* she wondered.

"Sorry," Harry apologised, not sounding particularly sorry at all. "It's just I considered applying a couple of years back. I wonder what my task would have been?"

"You survived a Killing Curse twice, Harry. Do you really think they'd feel the need to test you?"

"Of course they would. You helped Ron defeat a troll when you'd only been in school for a few weeks, not to mention the whole Voldemort thing. Instead of something dangerous they ask you to do something you've always had trouble with. Oh God," he muttered. "They'd want me to learn Occlumency. From Snape."

"Professor Snape, Harry," Hermione chastised, only half in jest. "You know, I plan on learning Occlumency anyway... I wonder if Professor Snape works for the Mysteries? That might explain why you keep seeing him in the Ministry."

"Or he's applying, only his impossible task is to teach Occlumency to me." Harry shivered. "I'm definitely avoiding him from now on, just in case!" He took the broom from her and absently wiped her sweaty fingerprints from the handle with his sleeve. "We just need to find a way to make you fly. Does it have to be by broom?"

"I'm not sure. The only other things I've flown are a thestral and a dragon, and I'm pretty sure they expect me to do more than cling on to something with my eyes closed." They trudged back towards the house. "If only there was a way to fly without relying on something else's magic. I'm never going to trust a carnivorous animal to keep me safe, and when it comes to brooms, I just can't get over the fact that there's only an enchanted twig between me and a very painful landing."

"She doesn't mean it," Harry placated the Zephyr as he leant it against the porch. "She just doesn't understand the artistry of your construction. Besides," he added, turning to Hermione, "if you learn how to fly without a broom, people are going to start wondering if you're the next Dark Lord."

"I didn't mean it like that." Hermione frowned.

"Good," Harry said. "Because the only person we know who could teach you is Snape, and I can't see him consenting to an afternoon in the paddock while you snap at him."

"You're right." Hermione shook her head. "That would be even more excruciating than today has been. And I'm sorry if I snapped at you. You've been brilliant. Do you think you could get me a job with the Aurory, instead?"

"God, no," Harry smiled. "You'd drive me mental within a week. We've only had one go at flying; just give it time. Now let's head inside and see if Molly's left anything in the cake tin. I think both of us could use the sugar."

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 9

It's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

When Hermione had wished she could fly without a broom, she honestly had not wished to fly completely unaided. The night on which the Order had lost Professor Moody had been too full of clouds and curses for her to catch even a glimpse of Voldemort as he had streaked after Harry, but she'd seen the faces of those who had. The story of Snape's resignation-cum-willing defenestration hadn't reached her until after the Battle of Hogwarts, but again, the story had been told with deep unease. Hermione assumed it was one of those things you had to be wizard-raised to understand, like why it was perfectly acceptable to chain a dragon up under the ground and torture it, but killing a unicorn was tantamount to butchering a baby. Flying without a broom was up there with being a Parselmouth.

Yet the more Hermione considered it, the more sensible it sounded.

Harry's questioning had made her realise that she had been given no definite parameters to complete the trial; simply that she had to be able to fly. She took that to mean she could learn a professional level Wonky Faint on a broom, giving herself and Harry palpitations in the process, or that she could simply traverse from one end of Hilary's office to the other with no other propulsion than her own magic.

Her *own* magic that was the key. She hadn't been kidding when she had compared a broom to a charmed twig. No matter how good someone else's magic was, there was always the chance that it might fail her. Hermione knew and trusted her magical ability. She could feel her magic, thrumming away quietly and constantly just beneath her ribs, and had once, thanks to an experimental cupcake in Canberra, even seen it. It was real and it was reliable.

If she could find a way to fly by herself, then her future with the DoM would be guaranteed.

It was just rather unfortunate that, as Harry had pointed out, there was only one man who could help her.

Finding Snape was worryingly easy. Hermione simply joined Harry on his way back from lunch on Monday and waited in the Ministry Atrium until the crowds had cleared. As Harry had predicted, their former Professor was also present, waiting by the security booth, his dark eyes flickering over the thinning crowd.

Hermione hoped he didn't really have any evil intent, loitering the way he was, despite Harry's misgivings. Although if ~~he~~ *he* were up to something, Hermione doubted he would do something so obvious as hang around the Ministry. Snape might be many things, but sloppy was not one of them.

As if able to hear her thoughts over the chatter, he looked up and caught her eyes. Hermione looked away instantly, flustered ~~di~~ *di*ot, she chastised herself. *Now he knows you were watching him.* It would have seemed less strange had she simply held his gaze. When she looked up his eyes were still on her. Unlike her, Snape seemed to have no qualms about blatant staring. Hermione felt the fleeting urge to try and stare him down, just to see if it could be done. Knowing it would most likely be as pointless as trying to out stare a Kneazle, she looked away again, glancing left, then right, before crossing the busy Atrium towards him.

Half way there, she realised she had no idea how to approach him. With Harry she had simply made her blunt request and hoped that he would say yes. But Severus Snape was a different animal entirely. He had never been a favourite when she had been at school, and she was fairly certain that the dislike was mutual. It wasn't as if she could tell him why she needed to learn, either.

Although, if Harry could work it out with several years of Auror experience under his belt, surely it wouldn't take Professor Snape very long at all.

Her palms grew damp, and she could feel that awful tension in her stomach that appeared whenever she prepared to speak before a crowd.

Severus was stumped.

He had already tried speaking to Harry Potter, but the boy wanted nothing to do with him. Even when Severus did the unthinkable and offered to speak with him about Lily, Potter's son simply shook his head and walked away. Minerva's formal, stilted apology for believing the worst of him had been delivered with so much frosty reserve that Severus knew the events of the last few years would forever stand between them. The other staff at Hogwarts had always taken their lead from the Head teacher and it was no different now. The Malfoy family had offered financial support as if such a thing was necessary but again, there had been too many lies, too much subterfuge, for any easy friendship.

It was sad how few options that left him with.

Severus fiddled with the scrap of paper in his pocket. One little word was all that stood between him and a possible second chance within the Mysteries. Everybody knew the place was filled with oddballs and black sheep Severus' past seemed tame compared with a few of the longer serving wizards and that was only the few whose identity he knew. It made him hopeful.

And so he returned to the Ministry. He might try the Three Broomsticks, or the Leaky or any number of wizarding establishments, but the Ministry made the most sense. As the single largest employer of magical persons within the UK, it offered him the highest concentration of possible targets at any one time.

At least that was the idea. In truth and Severus had lied for so long that he now made a point of telling the truth, at least to himself it was simply to remind himself that he was still part of this world. If he failed in his task, then there would be nowhere left open to him. He had abandoned the Muggle world many years before, but not before it had become clear that there was no place for him there either.

Somewhere, amid the crowd, was his second chance.

Feeling eyes upon him, Severus turned in their direction. Their owner, a young woman in tailored robes looked away quickly, blushing becomingly. It was enough to intrigue him, and he watched as frustration, doubt and hesitation flickered across her face before settling into something approaching resolution, and she began to move towards him.

It only took a few seconds for him to place her, by which time she was almost upon him. The smart robes and elegant twist of hair were a distraction, but there was no disguising basic bone structure.

Hermione Granger.

Severus didn't realise he'd spoken aloud until she replied, "Professor Snape."

"No," he answered.

Her eyes widened. "No?"

"I am no longer a professor, Miss Granger."

She flushed. "No, of course not." Conversation ended then as she looked around unhappily, and Severus felt a twinge of annoyance, in no small part directed at himself. He tried again.

"How may I help you?"

"I..." she began, only to falter, looking miserable. "How are you, sir?"

"Well enough, thank you." When the young witch failed to reply, he tried again. "Yourself?"

"I'm very well, thank you," she answered automatically. "Can we talk?"

"Apparently not without effort," Severus murmured.

"I... I suppose I should start by apologising for not coming to see you sooner. You were still recuperating when I left, and I've not been back in a few years, but I shouldn't have gone without thanking you properly. I sent you a card. I'm not sure you would even remember."

Severus remembered. A card from a Muggleborn Gryffindor who had reason to bear him a personal grudge had been one of the reasons he had foolishly believed he might truly be allowed to move on from the dark days of war. If she had been willing to forgive, then hope was real indeed. He had wondered if she would visit, had considered carefully what he might say if she had appeared at his bedside. He would have apologised of course, tried to explain that he'd had no choice in his treatment of her, asked for absolution.

But she had never visited. No one had.

It had given him a rather bitter satisfaction to Vanish her card along with the others on the day he had discharged himself from hospital.

"The last time I saw you... well, the time before then, Luna and I were standing guard outside your office. Draco let the Death Eaters into the school, and you made us wait inside your office until it was all over. At the time I thought it was the Felix Felicis that kept us away from them, but really it was you. We thought you were up to no good."

Severus held up a hand. He'd been forced to listen to a number of similar speeches from those wishing to lessen the guilt they felt about him. At first they had given him some satisfaction, but he soon realised that they were rarely made for his benefit. "Do you honestly expect me to talk with you about that night, Miss Granger?"

"No, of course not! I'm surprised you've let me speak for this long, to be honest. I was going to ask a favour of you, but I see now I have no right. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, proffes Mr Snape, it won't happen again. And I'm truly sorry to have believed the worst of you. I know we were supposed to, but you'd already given us so many reasons to believe that you were good. I should have trusted you."

"Wait!" he called. "Ask your favour."

"Oh!" She blushed, looking around the now empty Atrium. "It was a long shot anyway, but you see, I rather hoped... I want you to teach me how to fly."

Hermione had seen enough nature documentaries to know that when a predator became very quiet and very still, they were preparing to strike. Or they were asleep. There was nothing remotely lethargic about Snape's hard eyes as he watched her.

"Alright," he agreed.

"Alright?" Hermione echoed. "Wait, you mean you'll teach me? Just-*Just like that?*" It was on the tip of her tongue, but she had no wish to do anything to jeopardize this opportunity.

"Just like that?" Harry demanded. "He simply agreed to teach you?"

"I know; I was as shocked as you are! I'm supposed to meet him tomorrow morning to begin our lessons."

"I'm really not comfortable with the idea of you going to his house, Hermione," Ron said. "I know it's not my place to say anything, but this strikes me as a bit suspicious."

"Oh, me too!" Hermione agreed. "But we're meeting at the Ministry. Apparently they have rooms you can hire for meetings and conferences on the ground floor. I'll be within hexing distance of the Aurory the whole time."

"I wonder what he's up to." Harry frowned.

"Maybe he misses teaching?" Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe he's genuinely trying to become an approachable, helpful person. Maybe this is who he has been the whole time, but we never got to see it because he had to act like he was Voldemort's man."

"No, he might have been stressed to breaking point, but his dislike was honest enough. Maybe it was only ever focussed on me. Who knows? If I hadn't been there, he may actually have liked you two."

"Not me, mate." Ron grinned. "After Percy and the twins, there was no chance he was ever going to look kindly on a Weasley. Even Ginny used to get up his nose." He glanced at Harry. "Oh, sorry mate."

Hermione caught the pained expression on Harry's face. "Things still difficult between the two of you?"

"They would be if she stayed in the country for longer than five minutes. The Harpies are touring South Africa at the moment."

"She was under the impression that Harry might be going with her," Ron explained.

"But I can't just up and leave my work for weeks at a time." He sighed. "She used to get annoyed that I worked so hard towards becoming an Auror, but I think she convinced herself that things would calm down once I had finished my training. Then she thought I might take it easy once I secured a promotion, but I can't just stop doing my job properly. Being an Auror, it's... it's what I do."

"You've always had a bit of a saving people thing," Hermione agreed. "But Ginny's known that since you saved her when she was little. Surely she knows people don't just change, even if the war has ended?"

"Exactly," answered Harry. "Which is why I'm less than thrilled about Snape simply agreeing to help you."

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 9

It's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

Severus paced the length of the conference room. It had pale cream walls and the odd, echoing quality of a room that had been extended by magical means. There was a dusty looking spider plant in the corner and a low table by the window with an instruction manual for the magical office furniture pre-sets. Otherwise, the room was empty.

He'd arrived early. It was somewhat ingrained to wish to survey the landscape and find the higher ground, even when dealing with a Muggle-born witch.

Especially when dealing with a Muggle-born witch.

Severus toyed with the scrap of paper still in his pocket. *Was he doing the right thing?* It wasn't as if there was anything inherently dangerous in flying, other than the obvious chance of falling, but it came with certain complications. Under normal circumstances, he would never have considered teaching it to anyone, least of all a witch he barely knew. Then again, when had circumstances ever been normal? His life was perhaps the most uneventful that it had been in many years, but that in itself was abnormal, and adjusting was *hard*. It was almost a relief when someone had finally requested he bestir himself on their behalf.

Hermione Granger. He'd spent the previous evening trying to recall what he could about the girl, but the brief time that she had been his student had been so overshadowed by the Dark Lord's imagined, imminent, then actual return, that she was reduced to little more than a handful of recollections of an earnest face, permanently placed beside that of Harry Potter. A hand raised to answer questions directed at other students, essays far longer than requested and the occasional storm of teenaged tears.

Oh, he *knew* that she had been instrumental in destroying the Dark Lord's Horcrux. Knew that she had been there as he had haemorrhaged on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, but, with a self-awareness born of long years of introspection, he chose not to examine either. Instead, another memory tickled the back of his mind: brewing cures to remove the fur from her face following a botched potion when she had been a little girl.

Severus could only hope that she had outgrown her tendency to try and run before she could walk. He certainly had no wish to be held accountable if she tried to fly before she knew how to land.

Realising that he had raised his hand to rub absently at the scar on his neck, Severus folded his arms tightly over his chest. This might be the first time he had acted as a teacher since Albus had died – certainly the first time he had ever attempted to teach anyone over the age of eighteen – but now was not the time to indulge in nervous tics. He'd need to be on top form if there was any hope that she might be persuaded to trust him.

Hermione had been uncertain about what to wear to a flying lesson, but she had a feeling that her usual robes and heels would be inappropriate. Jeans would have been her preference, but Muggle clothing always made her feel uncomfortable in the Ministry. In the end she settled for tailored black trousers and a blouse, together with a long Marks and Spencer cardigan that looked rather like an open fronted robe, if you squinted.

The hotel she had chosen was profoundly Muggle, but large and anonymous enough for her to Apparate from her room. She landed in the Atrium and made her way over to the guard to have her wand weighed. "I'm looking for the Tintagel suite?"

"Third door down, love," he smiled, handing back her wand. "Coffee and tea available on request. Jiffy is the house-elf on duty this morning; just call if you need anything."

"Thanks." Hermione smiled back, glad that she'd brought a bottle of water in her handbag. There was a good chance that Jiffy was a paid elf, left without a family after the war, but Hermione would never get over her qualms regarding Ministry-sanctioned slave labour.

She found the room easily. She half expected Snape to sweep in late as he had for their first Potions lesson, but he was already there, waiting with his arms crossed, his forehead creased in impatience. Hermione managed to resist the urge to check her watch and simply dropped her bag on the floor by the door.

"Flying as a magical discipline is a very rare and little studied branch of magic. As such there are many misconceptions about both it and those who practise it, the main being that it is one of the darker magics. Flying itself is a misnomer. The practise is more properly known as Volantis, one who flies, a Volanci. Flying and Volantis are as different as Legilimency is from the Muggle concept of mind reading."

Hermione listened in silence. She'd never thought to hear him lecture her again, and there was an almost visceral pleasure in hearing the once familiar rise and fall of his voice. The details of his survival had been sketchy when she had left to find her parents, and even Harry hadn't known the whole story. Even now, with his deepest secrets spilled along with his dying memories, Severus Snape still managed to be something of a mystery. Either the damage to his throat had not been as extensive as she'd believed, or the Healers had done a wonderful job when treating him.

"The associations with Dark magic have arisen because of the use of strong emotions in driving oneself through the air. Simply staying afloat can be incredibly draining to one's magical reserves. Hate or fear are easy ways of supplementing and reinforcing magic and were once relied upon in training. It's possible to use other emotive force happiness, say but they can be harder to maintain.

"I shall not be using emotions to teach you. We are not close and, although you may have some residual ill-feeling towards me from your time at Hogwarts, I doubt you would have asked me to teach you if you truly loathed or feared me. Instead I shall simply teach you the basics of the process; if you decide to use emotions to fuel your flight, that is up to you. Until then, expect to find Volantis a difficult and draining endeavour."

He pushed himself away from the wall and clasped his hands behind his back, every inch the former professor.

"Before we begin, there are some simple exercises I wish to take you through. If you would stand?"

He Vanished the leather office chair that she'd chosen from the catalogue and walked around her.

"Close your eyes," he instructed tersely. Hermione, expecting a rant about the ability to clear her mind, did as asked. "Now fall backwards."

"What?" she demanded, looking round.

"Close your eyes and allow yourself to fall backwards." Severus frowned at her. "I'm certain that this is a very basic Muggle technique."

Turning back, Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Fall*, she told herself. *Just fall*. The very, very worst case scenario would be that he wouldn't catch her and she would land painfully on the flagstones. A cracked skull or bruised coccyx was easily mended, but she would have been made to look a fool.

"Miss Granger."

Hermione realised that she had balled her hands into fists. Forcing her fingers to relax and her arms to lie loosely at her sides, she let the breath slide from her lungs and fell backwards.

There was an awful moment of naked vulnerability as gravity took hold. Her stomach clenched and something just beneath her ribcage jolted, flooding her system with adrenalin.

How long did it take a person to fall? A second? Half a second? Less? It was long enough for Snape to decide whether he was going to catch her or not. It was long enough to determine whether she had made the right choice. It was long enough for her to worry that some magical survival instinct ought to have kicked in, shrugging off the demands of gravity on her behalf, halting her progress.

Was that what flying was? Refusing to fall by magical means? Was that what Snape was showing her?

Had she failed already?

Then a surprisingly strong pair of hands caught her and she was lowered gently to the floor.

Hermione could feel her cheeks burning, but she couldn't bring herself to open her eyes just yet. The floor was cold and hard beneath her, and she could feel the looming presence of her former professor at her head.

He helped her to her feet and waited patiently as she brushed herself down and tried to find some level of equilibrium. He moved across the room and turned to face her. Hermione had the strangest feeling that he was only moments away from bowing and assuming the stance of a dueller. Instead, he simply held his wand lightly at his side.

"Now, close your eyes and allow yourself to fall."

"But..." There was no way that he would be able to catch her where he stood. No way at all.

Feeling that she was missing something vitally important, Hermione closed her eyes and fell.

The horrible swooping feeling was there once more, as was the fear.

No hands were there to catch her this time. Instead, Hermione felt his magic reach out to firmly halt her progress. It wasn't the indignity of a Levicorpus, but neither was it the waftiness of a Wingardium Leviosa. It was as if she were being held in a steady, trusted embrace.

"We will be flying far above the ground, Miss Granger, testing what speeds and altitudes you can cope with. You need to be able to trust both myself and my magic to keep you safe."

Floating in the secure grip of his spellwork, Hermione reached out with magic of her own to test the stands of magic that held her. It was a delicate spell, as beautiful and intricate as spun glass, but with a steely strength that was unmistakable.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her closely as she examined the spell.

"I'll trust you," she agreed.

They practised falling until her heart was no longer pounding wildly in her chest. The constant adrenalin left Hermione flushed and sweaty, her clothes streaked with dust, but she felt more alive than she had done in weeks. By the time they stopped for lunch her hands were shaking and she was unable to manage more than a few bites of canteen salad. Come five o'clock, she was exhausted and elated in equal measure. She was so giddy that she misjudged the Apparition back to her hotel room and landed in the tiny bathtub, her fingers tingling with the pins and needles effect of a near-Splinch.

Being exceptionally Muggle, there was no Floo connection in the hotel, and Harry like all people who aren't quite happy with modern technology had his phone turned off. Hermione considered risking the jump to the Burrow, but arriving uninvited and unannounced at dinnertime would probably test even Molly's hospitality, especially if Hermione were to arrive minus a limb. Instead, she made her way across the car park to the chain pub opposite the hotel and chose her dinner from the specials board.

She wasn't certain why she was so unreasonably excited. She hadn't learnt how to fly. In fact, she hadn't performed a single spell, unless one counted the numerous Freshening Charms she'd flicked at her robes and face throughout the day. Snape hadn't shouted at her, which had been a pleasant surprise, but neither had he offered her any encouragement; each time she forgot her fears and fell, he simply had her repeat the exercise again. Yet Hermione couldn't help but feel she had accomplished

something and that she was on the cusp of achieving far more.

Her dinner was rather good, and she was tempted to linger over pudding, but never having been comfortable dining alone, she decided to settle for a bar of chocolate in her room instead.

Hermione delayed calling her parents until just before she went to bed, but she could tell by the sleepy voice that answered the phone that it was still horribly early in Canberra.

"How did the interview go, poppet?" her dad enquired after a jaw cracking yawn. "Hang on, let me put you on speaker phone."

"Really well," Hermione replied. "I was shown my office there and then. I just have to undergo an assessment for them before I can begin."

Her mother's voice was muffled from across the room. "Did you tell them about the potion with the copra, darling?"

"They already knew. Apparently I'm a person of interest."

Hermione imagined the look her parents were exchanging half proud, half concerned. She didn't like to tell them that she had catalogued some three hundred and eighty seven potions that made use of copra and had no idea which one they were thinking of.

"Any idea what the assessment will entail?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "They want me to learn how to fly."

Her parents were silent, and Hermione could imagine *that* look only too well. "But darling, I thought you hated flying. Worse than skiing and that was ~~was~~ *after* you crashed into that nice couple from Denmark."

"I know, Mum, but I've found a way that might just work. Professor Snape has agreed to teach me how to fly without a broom, just using magic alone."

"I always thought brooms were horribly clichéd, you know," Imogen Granger mused. "A little bit too Wicked Witch of the West."

"You know," her husband sighed, "if anyone is listening in on this conversation, they're going to think this is all some sort of bizarre code."

"Hang on a second," her mother interrupted. "Isn't Professor Snape the one everyone thought was dead? You had a bit of a thing for him, didn't you?"

"Only when I thought he was dead." Hermione laughed. "I wouldn't have had the nerve to fancy him to his face. Which, now I think about it, makes no sense whatsoever. He's a bit..." She paused as she considered how to describe her former teacher's rather dubious charms. "Intense," she finished lamely.

"You just be careful," her dad instructed. "And not just with the flying. I'm sure brooding heroes are all well and good when there's a war to be fought, but I'm certain they'd make lousy sons-in-law!"

"Daa-ad!" Hermione whined. "Mum, make him shut up!"

"You've not seen Hermione's stash of press cuttings, Malcolm. I'd be more than happy to have him round for Christmas."

"Mum! That's it, I'm going to bed. I'll call you soon, okay? Good night!"

Hermione settled back on her pillows, a silly grin on her face. Sharing the news that she was going to learn how to fly had made it seem more... real. More achievable.

She wriggled, trying to get more comfortable. She'd barely noticed at the time being so caught up in the queasy, gut-churning sensation of letting herself become helpless, even if only for a second. Afterwards she had been too taken with the sensation of Snape's magic cradling her in the air to really dwell on it but now, when she thought back to the morning spent together, she could still feel the warmth of his palms through her robes as he lowered her to the floor.

Her skin tingled in a way that had nothing to do with Splinching.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 9

The Department of Mysteries has its own set of entrance criteria, but as Hermione is about to discover, it's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

The next day, Snape had her practise *Arresto Momentum*.

Hermione tried to argue that it was a charm she had known since high school and had used it previously in a life threatening situation.

To her surprise, Snape had listened to her arguments in interest. He then made her practise the spell while falling.

It was just about possible to gasp out "*Arresto Momentum!*" whilst collapsing to the floor. The charm had just enough time to create a jarring buffer of air between her and the ground, although it took Hermione a few attempts before she could manage without catching her tongue between her teeth as the impact jolted them together. Snape, apparently expecting this, had brought a foul tasting healing potion for her to rinse her mouth with, before demanding that she try again.

He stopped being quite so fanciable after that, which was a relief seeing as he'd arrived that morning wearing a battered leather jacket which had proved rather distracting. Seeing a wizard dressed like a Muggle was almost as good as seeing a normal man in a uniform. This realisation led to the thoroughly distracting thought that perhaps *that* was the reason behind the whole fancying Ron fiasco, a train of thought that nearly lost her a tooth.

It was worse when Snape made her practice falling from her conjured office chair. Although sturdy and leather, it had a sickening habit of sliding on its casters before she had even managed to climb on properly, and the whole exercise left her shaken.

Strangely, none of it was enough to make Hermione want to stop. She was nervous, edgy and growing increasingly addicted to the feeling. Something about Snape let her

believe that she was safe, regardless how many bruises she acquired. It was like being turned upside down on a rollercoaster. No matter how hard she was shaken, no matter how many twists the ride took, she was secure in her harness. She was safe.

Hermione, unlike Harry, had never experienced Professor Snape in a one to one setting. Being the sole focus of his attention was unnervingly intense. Without the distraction of twenty classmates to diffuse his penetrating black stare, she could feel his gaze like a physical pressure between her shoulder blades every time she turned her back to fall.

He never caught her with his hands after that first time, and Hermione began to wonder if she'd imagined it. It struck her as absurd that he would have suggested catching her so casually, yet she couldn't shake the memory of his hands lowering her gently to the floor. He'd snatched them away the second she was down, but that brief moment had been enough to etch itself indelibly upon her memory.

"The ability to fly has garnered much interest over the years, both in wizard and Muggle culture. Yet for all the huge wealth of stories about flying carpets, witches on broomsticks and winged horses, there are very few tales of anyone flying under their own power. Icarus and his father donned a pair of wings that allowed them to flee from Crete."

Hermione floated some six feet above the ground, her wand clutched securely in her hand, letting Snape's voice wash over her as he paced below. It was an interesting lecture, and it was easy to see that he had devoted an impressive period of study to the subject.

"The Togolese Adze can fly, but it must transform into a firefly to do so. The Japanese god Fujin is often depicted racing through the sky, but usually with great bags filled with wind that keep him afloat. The Serbian Zduhac protects his village by flying up into the clouds to fight the demons that bring storms, but only by leaving his body behind. According to Greek..."

The spell holding her suddenly failed and Hermione, who had been caught up in his lecture, fell to the ground in an ungainly heap.

"Miss Granger," Snape murmured, standing over her. "You recall the purpose of this exercise?"

She pulled herself to her feet and dusted herself down. Her landing had jolted the air from her lungs, but it could have been far worse had it not been softened by a Cushioning Charm. "To see if I could halt a fall that I hadn't planned."

"And how would you say that went?" he pressed.

Hermione bit back the first five retorts that sprang to mind and concentrated on getting her breath back. "Not well."

"Let us try again." Snape flicked his wand at her, and Hermione felt herself being carried up towards the ceiling, caught in the intricate web of his magic once more. "And Miss Granger? This time I shall not be casting any charms to aid you, is that understood? Now, in Greek mythology, flying is often depicted as being the domain of the gods. However, in times of need they were willing to share this gift."

Hermione gripped her wand tighter and tried not to fall for the mesmerizing qualities of his voice again.

It was a difficult letter to write, but Hermione knew she was making the right decision. The offer to renew her contract for the next year had seemed like a safety net when she had left Honiara, but more recently it had come to feel as if it was hanging over her. She needed to fully commit to the idea of staying in the UK if she was going to succeed. Archiving the previously oral history of Melanesia had been a wonderfully challenging job, but she had swiftly come to realise how difficult it was. There, spells and magics had been passed from generation to generation and often were closely guarded. Some Malaitan families balked at the idea of allowing their Gualé neighbours in on their secrets, let alone the wider world. With the islands' Muggle population teetering uneasily on the edge of civil unrest, Hermione couldn't help but feel that her time in the Solomon Islands was through. It had been an adventure, a glorious, amazing adventure but her real life was waiting for her back in Britain and had been all along.

She had enough money saved to see her through, as long as her first payslip wasn't too far off. Thankfully, with Snape teaching her there was no way she could fail at her current task. She'd learnt a lot from him at Hogwarts, even when he used to overlook her in class, and not just about Potions. Expelliarmus, one of the more useful spells she knew and one that had saved Harry, and therefore *everyone*, on numerous occasions had first been demonstrated by him in that ridiculous duelling club. The graffiti in his sixth year text book alone had taught Harry more about potions than Slughorn had managed in an entire year.

Being taught by him one on one was intense, but Hermione could almost feel her mind expanding to take in all the new knowledge he wished her to absorb. No one had pushed her to learn like this before. Her previous teachers had always been happy to let her move at her own pace, confident that she would manage her own time. Snape, on the other hand, was relentless.

There were spells to reduce air resistance, spells to change her centre of gravity so that she did not spin in mid-air, spells to keep the wind from tearing away her Warming Spells. She had thought that it would just be a case of learning the spell to stay afloat, but Snape hadn't so much as hinted at what the incantation might be, let alone provided a practical demonstration. A few years ago this would have frustrated Hermione to the point of madness, but now she could appreciate the solid grounding his lessons provided. He wasn't just teaching her to fly, he was teaching her to excel.

No, with him on her side there was no reason to worry. Flying might have seemed like an insurmountable task just days before, but if anyone could help her achieve the impossible, it was he. The man had put a stopper in death after all.

It was decided: tomorrow, she would get to the Ministry in time to hire an owl and send her resignation. But before then, she had a far more difficult task to accomplish. Sealing the parchment, she left it on the dressing table by her handbag and picked up her phone.

"Goodness, Hermione, it's almost a reasonable hour! What time is it over there?"

"Late," Hermione guessed. "I've got news."

"Have you learnt how to fly, darling? Or is there a Scandinavian couple somewhere needing medical attention?"

"I haven't learnt how to fly," Hermione continued, ignoring the running joke that had been tired by the time she was sixteen. "But I'm close. That's not the news though."

"You're staying in Britain." It wasn't a question. It was hard to tell from just four words, but Hermione didn't think her father sounded too upset at the idea.

"I've been looking in the *Prophet*," she admitted. "If I don't get this job, then there are plenty of other departments recruiting. It just feels... like it's time to come back home."

"Oh, poppet. It's not like Honiara is exactly close, and you know your mother was never happy at the thought of your living somewhere so exotic. Although I think the onus will be on you to do the bulk of the visiting. Where will you live?"

"I hadn't got that far yet. There are some cheap boarding houses off Diagon Alley, but Harry's been hinting about renting me a room until I get myself settled. The Ministry pay would cover a flat, and it's not like I'd need to pay for transport." Hermione fiddled with the parchment on the desk. "Do you mind?"

"We know how much you gave up to move over here in the first place, Hermione. It's time for you to do what you want to do."

A glance at the clock had told him it wasn't quite six o'clock, but Severus kicked back the covers, unwilling to waste the morning. By seven, he was washed, dressed and

on his second cup of coffee. It wasn't until he Vanished the dog end of his third cigarette that he realised there might be a problem.

He was looking forward to meeting with Granger.

Granger wasn't the main attraction, although her company had been surprisingly less tiresome than he had expected. It was having company full stop. His days seemed to revolve around getting ready to meet her, drilling her on her spellwork, answering her questions of which there were many and setting her tasks to practise. Then, when he came home, he spent his evening planning the next day's lesson. He had more drive and focus than he had done in weeks.

It was rather sobering to realise just how lonely his life had become. It was one thing to convince yourself that you neither wanted nor needed the companionship of your peers when you were an angry teenager or a bitter, frightened man, but when all of that ceased to matter, a life lived alone was every bit as terrifying.

Which made him wonder if he was perhaps stalling for time. He'd wanted to give the girl a thorough grounding in the additional spells that would aid her, something he'd never been offered, but perhaps he'd been playing for extra time. Once Hermione Granger knew how to fly, she would have little need for him anymore. So, yes, by then he would hopefully have found gainful employment within the DoM, but he doubted any of his new colleagues would be so quick to assume he wished for their company at lunch or listen so intently whenever he spoke.

Severus forced himself to wait until half past eight before taking the Floo to the Ministry, counting down the minutes until he could reach for the pot of powder on the mantel, berating himself for his foolish eagerness all the while, but unable to contain it.

The Ministry was still quiet. With most workers arriving by Floo or Apparition, the Atrium didn't tend to get busy until almost quarter to the hour. Granger arrived only seconds after he did, approaching from somewhere else inside the Ministry, her cheeks flushed with evident excitement.

"Do you think the room will be unlocked yet?" she queried.

"It doesn't matter," Severus heard himself reply. "It's time we put what you've learnt into practise." He held out his hand. "Will you come with me?"

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 9

The Department of Mysteries has its own set of entrance criteria, but as Hermione is about to discover, it's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

To his surprise, Granger had accepted his hand readily and tucked herself against his chest in the manner of someone accustomed to travelling by Side-Along. Amused by the gesture, Severus twisted them into the Apparition, taking extra care to make the sometimes jarring journey as smooth as possible. Happily, they landed almost silently, and his companion was able to step back without staggering. Severus was curiously pleased to see that she didn't look the least bit nauseated by the journey and was already looking around in interest.

"Where are we?"

"This is Heaton Park in Manchester."

"It's gorgeous!" He watched as she turned around, taking in the full scope of the park with its rolling hills and deep valleys filled with trees. "All this is really in Manchester?"

"This is just part of it." Severus realised that he was pleased that she liked it. Since finding the place he'd always wanted to be able to show it off to someone else and, although this girl was not that person, her response to the beauty of the park was oddly gratifying. "There are a number of buildings dotted around if you keep walking to the south. It's a public park, but the northern area has light anti-Muggle warding that makes it useful for our purpose."

She turned her attention back to him, smiling widely. "Which is?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's time for you to take to the air."

The girl blanched, her large eyes dark against her pale skin. "Really, don't you think it's a little soon? I mean I know we've gone over a lot of the necessary spells, but we haven't even touched on flying itself."

"Hermione," he interrupted. "I shall do the flying itself, at least initially. All you have to do is trust me."

There was a long pause in which neither of them spoke. Severus began to wonder if he had moved too quickly and spooked her, but after a few more moments of silence, she set her jaw and nodded. "What do I have to do?"

When he lifted his wand, she flinched visibly. "I'm just going to cast a Disillusionment charm, to be doubly sure. You may cast your own if you prefer?"

"No, no," she demurred. "Go ahead."

Severus bit back a sigh and cast the spell, watching as she faded into the undergrowth behind. Even blurred and coloured like a cartoon chameleon, it was easy to tell she was gnawing on her bottom lip.

"If you prefer it," he heard himself offer, "you may take my arm."

Instead she grasped his hand, her sweaty palm slick against his, their fingers laced almost painfully together. Severus cast the familiar spells to bind her weight to his magic and watched as she relaxed back into their secure grasp. Steeling himself, he lifted them from the ground.

He allowed them to rise until they hovered some five feet from the ground. "See?" he asked. "It's no different from floating in the office. This place simply has a better view." Her grip on his hand was painful, but a quick glance confirmed that she still seemed resolved to this, and he sent a surge of power into the spell, bringing them level with the tree tops.

To the south, it was just possible to glimpse the imposing, stately Heaton Hall. The graceful Orangery was closer, larger than the average home, and beyond them both, half hidden in a haze of sunshine and traffic fumes, lay Manchester itself. At this height, the Capability Brown inspired landscaping of the park was laid out beneath them like a child's game.

It was a beautiful view. Perhaps the odd hot air balloon had traversed this path, but as far as Severus knew, he was the only one who had ever seen it like this. Until now.

Unexpectedly, Severus found his concentration was broken by a sharp tug on his arm. The jolt spun him towards his companion, and he suddenly found the witch grasping him tightly around the neck, her face pressed to his. Her nose was squashed against his ear, and he could feel her hot, gasping breath against his neck.

"Take me back down!" she hissed. "Please, I can't do this!"

The moment their feet touched the ground, she wrenched herself away from him and sank to the ground, pale and sweaty. She swallowed convulsively and Severus was certain that she would vomit, but after a few minutes her breathing evened out, although she remained distinctly green about the gills.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, and Severus was appalled to realise that she was dangerously close to tears.

"Should we try again?" he ventured.

"No! This is useless! I've spent all this week thinking this was going to be easy, but I can't." Her voice grew higher and sharper. "I *justan't!*"

Severus tried again. "A fear of heights is nothing to be ashamed of."

"It's not the heights I'm worried about," she snapped, finally turning to face him. "It's the falling from them that gets me."

Severus took a step back. "I would not have let you fall."

Snape Apparated them closer into town and steered her towards a pub. They found a table by the window, and Severus went to the bar to order their drinks. Hermione requested a large syrupy coke, remembering Harry's insistence she have something sugary after their attempts at the Burrow. When Snape brought the drinks to the table, she was touched to find it had been supplemented with a large glass of wine. She drank the coke down, surprised at how thirsty she was, before sipping more daintily at the house white.

She glanced at her companion, the poor man whom she'd clung to like a limpet whilst shrieking like a banshee, and felt like crying all over again. He had spent so many hours preparing her for that moment, only to find that all his precious time had been wasted. Hermione had compounded the issue by doing what she always did when upset, and snapped at him. It had been easy to see that she had hurt his feelings. For all he had berated Harry as a student for not being able to control his emotions, Snape was surprisingly easy to read. Harry had been good natured enough not to take offence when she had compared his prized broom to an enchanted twig, but her old professor was not the sort of man who would take any impugning of his magical capability with good grace.

Her stomach rumbled loudly, and Hermione was surprised to realise that it was past midday. She passed the menu to Snape like a white flag, hoping that an offer of food might work as well on him as it used to do on Ron.

She was relieved when he sullenly requested the most expensive steak on the menu and another pint.

The food arrived quickly, and they ate in silence. Hermione was grateful for the quiet. Normally she liked to dissect each and every exam, especially when she could identify the parts where she had faltered. This time, there would be no academic satisfaction in knowing where she had failed.

She felt as if she ought to at least *try* and explain herself to him.

"I've never been able to fly," she began quietly. "I've never been able to ski or roller-skate. After Harry and I flew Buckbeak up to Professor Flitwick's office I was sick all over Harry's trainers. I was twenty before I learnt how to walk in high heels. I thought with you teaching me, it might be easy." She risked a glance at Snape to see if he was actually listening. His face was stony, but he was watching her intently. "I just... I just find it so hard to trust something that isn't completely under my control."

Severus' face remained hard, his eyes sharp with anger. "Look," he said, pushing back his plate. "If you can't bring yourself to trust me, then perhaps we're just wasting our time."

"You're right," Hermione sighed.

His voice was quiet. "You want to stop?"

"No!" she cried. "That's not what I meant at all. It's not an issue of trust. This whole fear of flying nonsense is just that: nonsense. *Know* that I can trust you," she reasoned, snagging the last onion ring and dunking it in the dregs of the mayonnaise. "I *do* trust you. And just say you did drop me," she continued, "I've proved time and again that I can catch myself. What?"

The flashing anger was gone and he was smiling. It was an odd sort of smile. It was triumphant, almost savagely so, but didn't look particularly happy. "You trust me."

"Of course I do." She waved the onion ring at him to emphasise her point. "I'd love to be able to say that I've always trusted you, but we both know that isn't true. You made such a convincing villain when I was eleven."

The odd smile slipped. "What changed?"

"I don't know. All I know is that I no longer need you to keep proving yourself to know that you are one of the good guys. Professor Dumbledore initiated or condoned everything that you did, but we never questioned him. Even now I still sort of believe that everything he did was for the best in the end, even if it did cause individual suffering."

Snape was still watching her, his face so carefully impassive that Hermione who only moments before had been able to see each emotion chase across his face felt cold. "I'm sorry, I don't know what I'm thinking, bringing all of that up."

"It's alright. Any discussion of my trustworthiness is always going to come back to that."

Hermione sighed. "Well I don't think it should."

When he rose from his chair, she was certain that she had probably ruined everything. Would it be too late to rescind her resignation? Perhaps one of those other Ministry jobs might not prove to be as boring as she feared.

"Come on then," he chided. "While we still have the light."

It was late afternoon, and the early summer sun leant a golden tinge to the air, bathing the park in a warm, bright light. It was slightly cooler than before, but the air was still.

Severus held out his hand, his feet just brushing the springy grass beneath. As his fingers closed around hers, she was aware of his magic reaching out to hold her.

Hermione twined her fingers in his, and then the ground fell away.

It would have been a lie to say her heart wasn't threatening to beat out of her chest or that her mouth wasn't dry as dust, but Hermione refused to let her fear take her. It

was like riding a rollercoaster. No matter how fast or far they went, she knew his magic would hold her safely. Although, just to make doubly sure, she pulled herself closer and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Peering over his shoulder, she could make out the park below. They were just brushing the treetops, their toes just inches from the canopy below. Severus drew them past a slightly taller tree, and Hermione marvelled at the thought that she could simply reach out and touch the highest leaves.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

She felt the satisfied rumble in his chest.

"It's all before you," he murmured. "Anything, anywhere. All you have to do is reach forwards and your magic will take you there. Freedom, unlimited and unparalleled."

Hermione pulled back to look at him. His normally sallow cheeks were flushed from the wind, which had lifted his lank hair from his face, teasing it this way and that. It was his eyes that caught her. They were alight with the same longing that coloured his voice.

It was then that she finally understood just what a gift he had given her. "Thank you," she whispered.

For a moment, she was certain that he was going to kiss her.

Instead, he cleared his throat. "In a moment, I'm going to remove the charms holding your weight. Alright?"

Hermione nodded, pulling herself back against his chest. His mouth was by her ear.

"But first, you need to know how to fly."

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 9

The Department of Mysteries has its own set of entrance criteria, but as Hermione is about to discover, it's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

Before, when Severus had first carried her into the air, Hermione had been too scared to really take any of it in, but now each of her senses was filled almost to bursting by the experience. Little if any of it, however, was thanks to the startled birds darting past them or the way the breeze rustled the treetops as they passed.

Now that she was paying attention, *really* paying attention, even the magic of flight faded into the background when compared with the overwhelming presence of the man who held her.

She'd practically wrestled him into a half-Nelson before lunch, but had been blind to anything other than the fact he needed to *put her down, now, thank you*. With the fear firmly locked away in the special compartment of her mind set aside for Things That Got in The Way—a place previously reserved for a deep, abiding distaste for camping, and moral scruples over the use of blackmail, especially of journalists—it was almost impossible *not* to notice him.

Severus smelled of cigarette smoke and the beer he'd drunk at lunch. The leather of his jacket was soft and cool to the touch. His cologne was spicy, deep and masculine, and it was with some difficulty that Hermione resisted pressing her face against his neck to drink in the heady scent of him. He smelled incongruously, she decided, of danger and of safety. *The rollercoaster effect*, she realised with a smile.

"Yes," she sighed at last, shifting her weight slightly. "Tell me the spell."

His hand moved from its light hold on her waist to her hip as he pulled her closer. Hermione was delighted and flustered to find herself pressed against his chest as he dipped his face into her hair to bring his lips level with her ear. She felt each puff of breath as he whispered his secret to her.

"Volanti?" she demanded, pulling back and breaking the spell. "That's it? The spell is just the name of the spell?"

Severus smiled, and it was so different to the smile she had seen in the pub that her heart forgot all about racing and did something fluttery instead. "You know how magic works," he reminded her. "Just try it."

It was nigh on impossible to focus enough to perform wandless magic, but Hermione was determined to succeed. Was that what he had been trying to teach her each time he had tried to distract her with his lectures? Possibly... probably... either way, his lessons had been well learned. Reaching inside herself, Hermione fed her magic into each syllable, taking care to copy his precise enunciation.

"*Volanti...*"

It was a curious sensation, not a bit like the spells that had allowed her to join Severus in the sky. No, this was much more like being made suddenly aware of the pull that gravity had on her and, she discovered with a few careful tweaks of magic, her ability to fight it. Summoning more magic, Hermione focussed her intent on moving a few inches left, then a few to the right. Her movements were jolty at first, but amazingly, it allowed her to control her movement through the sheer force of her will.

She knew she must look ungainly, like a novice contemplating their first time out on the ice rink, only moments from her feet sliding out from underneath her. Hermione could feel herself move ever closer to losing her balance and was wondering how Severus remained so perfectly centred, when she remembered the other spells he'd been at pains to teach her.

"*Stabilis*," she recited. "*Calfacio. Minus Ventus. Volanti!*"

Holding so many spells at once was difficult, like trying to hold a litter of squirming Kneazle kittens without allowing any to wriggle free, but her magic rallied, and suddenly she went from not falling, to *flying*.

And it was wonderful.

Sitting on a Thestral or clutching at the rough, shifting scales of a dragon could never have prepared her for the sensation of slicing through the air like this.

This was better than cauldrons, pointy hats and broomsticks. Turning a matchstick into a needle had been pretty damn impressive when she had been twelve, but it had been years since a spell had held such enchantment for her. This was magic with none of the trappings of a children's story. Glorious, unfettered, and unlike anything she had done before.

Although still nervous, thanks to Severus' coaching, there was a new fluidity to each move she made as she swooped cautiously from tree to tree. Hermione laughed out loud; perhaps one day, she might aim for the clouds or perform loop the loops in the sky, but for now, this was everything she had ever hoped for.

She allowed her toes to drag along the utmost leaves of a horse chestnut, before sinking a few feet to allow her fingers to do the same. Moving to the next tree, she startled a wood pigeon. It stared stupidly at her for a few moments, somewhat nonplussed at finding itself confronted with a human visitor, before taking to the air with a disgruntled coo. Hermione followed it to its perch in the next tree, and the next, before the poor thing took to the sky in search of a quieter roost. Hermione watched it go, aware of the childish wish to chase it through the sky, before remembering her silent, watchful companion. She blushed.

Severus had remained close by as she swerved artlessly from tree to tree. He didn't crowd her or provide instruction; he simply let her test the spell for herself, exploring her new found limits.

She drew towards him, circling him clumsily. He turned with her, and their movements suddenly reminded her of a stately, old-fashioned dance. He moved so beautifully that Hermione felt a strange yearning in her chest, an almost painful longing to possess such grace, such unconscious elegance and complete magical control.

The sudden tiredness ought to have been expected, but the abrupt heaviness of her limbs took Hermione by surprise, and she felt herself begin to sink. A sharp burst of panic raised her a few inches, but the heaviness won over, causing even her eyelids to droop. It reminded her of a few moments during the Final Battle when no amount of adrenalin, no amount of raw terror, could persuade her to fire another spell or take another faltering step. All she had wanted to do was lie down and sleep, no longer caring that stopping, even for a moment, would probably result in her death. It had been Ron, tugging on her hand, who had saved her then. This time it was Severus.

His magic caught her just before he did, pulling her towards him and decelerating her fall. Hermione had a few fleeting moments to enjoy the sensation of being clasped against him before they landed heavily, but safely, in a pile of limbs amid the undergrowth.

Hermione blinked slowly up at her rescuer. Her magic was already recovering, but the delicious, heavy fatigue still filled her, leaving her disinclined to move. There was something digging into her shoulder, and she could already feel the slight damp of the ground beneath her, soaking through her clothes, but the discomfort faded when compared to the wonderfully warm weight that pinned her.

Hermione was tempted to move her legs so that he could rest more comfortably against her, but she didn't dare risk any movement that might result in his pulling away. There was no preventing the silly smile from creeping across her face, though, as she concentrated on getting her breathing and her scattered thoughts back under control.

Eventually, she found her voice. "When you said the spell would be draining, I didn't think it would be like that."

To her surprise, Severus didn't move other than to brush back the hair that had escaped from its twist during her flight, smoothing it back with gentle touches. "You were safe," he assured her. "You would have stopped yourself if I hadn't."

Hermione had no idea if that was actually true, but as she resisted the urge to stretch like a cat beneath his petting, she decided it didn't really matter. Far more pressing was the growing suspicion that he might be about to kiss her.

Lazily, she tried to decide if she wanted him to and came to the happy conclusion that, yes, yes she really rather did. She tilted her hips, just slightly, and watched his eyes widen at the invitation before his hips pressed just a fraction more firmly back against her. Her body thrilled at the sensation. He wanted her too; she was certain of it.

"Granger..."

Abruptly, his weight was gone, and a vial of Pepper Up was thrust into her hand.

"You'll need further practice, but I'm sure you can appreciate it would be dangerous to do so without someone else present, or at least a good tethering spell."

And, just like that, he was gone.

Her parents were waiting to hear about her lessons, and she'd promised to let Harry know the moment she succeeded in flying or driving Snape to distraction, whichever came first. Oddly, back in her room with her phone in her hand, she felt she didn't really wish to speak with anyone, not just yet. Instead, she ran herself a bath, using her shower gel to create bubbles in the water.

It had been cool amongst the tree tops, the wind stronger there, and the hot water felt wonderful. It suited the lingering drowsiness that filled her, even as her magic strengthened.

Hermione let her hand slide across her chest, imagining that it was his hand, that the heat of the water was his warmth. She tilted her hips as before, imagining that he had not hesitated in pressing back against her, that she hadn't hesitated in untangling their legs to cradle him between her thighs.

Her hand moved lower as she let the scene play out in her head. This time though, he didn't pull away, but instead he dipped his head to brush his lips against hers...

The image refused to form. There had been moments when she had been certain that he meant to kiss her, but each time, her certainty had proved false. Now, even in her own mind, she couldn't imagine him closing the gap between them and claiming her lips with his own. Frustrated, she let her hand drop.

Perhaps her imagination was as exhausted as the rest of her. Or perhaps, having come so close to the real thing, no paltry fantasy was going to suffice.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 9

The Department of Mysteries has its own set of entrance criteria, but as Hermione is about to discover, it's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

Smith was waiting for him, as usual, but the piece of toast clutched in his hand suggested that he hadn't exactly been expecting him this time.

"Made some progress then, Professor?" the Interviewer surmised as he opened the door to the spinning room beyond. Severus brushed past him, not bothering to reply. Once the walls had slowed to a stop, he opened the closest door and marched inside.

Hilary was hanging her cloak from the hat stand, apparently having only just arrived herself, but she looked up in interest at their entrance, and noticing the determined set of Snape's jaw, bustled round the desk to join them.

The three of them approached the Device together. There was an air of ceremony about the proceedings that had not been present before, and Severus allowed himself to believe that he might finally find himself invested into the noble office of Unspeakable.

The Device whirred, and there was a clatter of keys before a small slip of paper was spat out into the tray. Severus snatched it up greedily, cupping it in his hands so neither of his companions had any chance of making out the old fashioned typeface.

There in black and white remained his task.

T r u s t .

"Bloody bugging Hell!" he hissed. "My apologies," he added, with a distracted nod towards Hilary. "She said that she... damn it!" The paper burst into bright, angry flames and curled into ash. "There has to be a fault with the Device," he continued. "Either that or this has been a deliberate ploy to waste my time."

Bartleby exchanged a look with Hilary and discreetly palmed his wand.

"Never mind, old chap. You're in time for breakfast, if you like toast. Or custard. There seems to be an awful lot of the stuff here these days."

"I can't actually believe it! Can you show me? Not here, obviously, I don't want to be sent to arrest you on suspicion of Dark behaviour, but after work? Ooh, I know! I'll get the Zephyr and meet you somewhere perhaps not the Burrow and we can fly together!" Harry finally paused to breathe, and Hermione took the opportunity to cut him off.

"Of course I'll show you," she laughed. "But maybe not tonight. I only learnt the very basics yesterday, and there are a few more things I need him to show me first."

Harry sighed the long suffering sigh of someone denied a treat simply because someone else was being painfully sensible. Then he frowned. "If he's only just taught you to fly, what was all of last week spent doing?"

Hermione prepared to launch into a long, convoluted lecture of the various spells and charms that she had mastered over the last few days, when she actually felt herself begin to blush. Thankfully Harry misinterpreted her embarrassment and laughed.

"You mean it's actually taken you this long to be able to do it? My God, Snape must have somehow acquired the patience of a saint. Better watch out; here he comes now." He pulled her into a tight hug and placed a sloppy kiss on her forehead. "I'll see you soon, alright?"

Hermione was rather nervous about seeing Severus again. Although nothing had actually happened between them yesterday, there was no denying that something had... *happened*.

Sleep had been a surprisingly long time coming last night, and Hermione had used the time for some serious thinking.

Severus Snape was not the sort of man to indulge in a casual dalliance, and if Hermione was serious about taking their unconventional flirtation any further, then she owed it to him and herself to decide whether she was seriously considering attempting to build a relationship with him. There would be obstacles, she knew, least of all the man himself, who seemed to have a tendency to pull away at the slightest hint of intimacy. He was also short tempered, irascible, closed off and a smoker. He could also, however, be surprisingly patient and kind. If Hermione was being honest, she had been growing increasingly attracted to him ever since he had snuck a Cushioning Charm beneath her during practice.

There was the slightest chance that Harry and Ron would be horrified at the thought of her and Severus together, but they were no longer in school, and they had lost the ability to make her life unbearable any time one of them felt a grudge. She had a guaranteed role as an Unspeakable, which meant that her social circle in the UK was likely to be very different to the one she had left behind. They boys would come around to the idea, eventually, and she could easily weather their disapproval until then.

Which just left Severus.

Hermione didn't doubt that he was attracted to her. She'd experienced a few of romantic moments in her time, but never had anything come close to the erotic potential of lying on damp bracken in a field in Manchester, hoping to be kissed by the man cutting off the circulation to her lower body. He had felt it too, which was why he had been so hasty to leave. That was the part that troubled her. Nerves or doubt, she could cope with, and while she did not truly believe that the man could still be pining after Lily Evans, even if his memories of her had been part of the argument to keep him from Azkaban, there was still that chance that he was involved with another woman. There hadn't been much time for personal conversation whilst falling from office chairs, an oversight that Hermione meant to remedy at the first opportunity.

It might be awkward, but an adolescence spent marshalling Ronald Weasley through his Charms homework and persuading Crookshanks to submit to the occasional Poppington's Patented Parasite Purge, had given her a good grounding in shepherding males through various unpleasant but necessary tasks.

Her confidence dipped, however, at Severus' approach. She'd expected him to be a little withdrawn after yesterday, or perhaps even a bit nervous she hadn't expected a look of such cold, hard fury.

"Good morning," she attempted. And then, because she was no good at keeping quiet, she asked, "Is everything alright?"

His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. "Everything is exactly as I should have expected," he replied cryptically. "Shall I Apparate us?"

"Yes," Hermione breathed, preparing to curl up against his chest when a thought struck her. "Actually, no. Can we start in here, first?" She opened the door to the Tintagel suite, glad that she'd booked the room until the end of the week.

Something had happened to upset him, that much was clear, and Hermione could only suppose that it was her fault. She was also fairly certain that there was very little chance that he would actually tell her what was wrong.

Had teaching her to fly caused him some sort of trouble? Hermione hadn't taken Harry's joke about Dark behaviour seriously, but she supposed that there could be those in the Ministry who might take a dim view of an acquitted Death Eater teaching a future Ministry employee any suspect spells. Still, that was preferable to the thought that he might have seen Harry kiss her and now believed she was some sort of floozy.

Standing in awkward silence, Hermione wondered what she might do to make things better without setting a precedent. If there was any chance of an adult relationship developing between them, then Hermione refused to be caught forever in the role of peace broker. If something was wrong, then he needed to tell her.

He stood across from her, arms folded, waiting with little pretence at patience for her to speak.

"Severus," she began. "Will you do something for me?"

He gave a slight nod, as if she'd just confirmed something for him. "Ask."

"I want..." She tried again. "I would like you to close your eyes and allow yourself to fall."

"What?" he demanded.

"I believe this is a tried and tested Muggle technique." When he didn't respond to her admittedly weak attempt at humour, she tried again. "Please, Severus. I promise I'll catch you. Just turn around, close your eyes and fall."

Later, Hermione could never decide who had been more surprised when he had complied with her wishes and fell back into her arms. He was both taller and heavier than she, but Hermione simply caught him beneath the armpits and allowed his momentum to carry her down too, sinking with him until his head rested upon her lap.

Like she had before, Severus kept his eyes closed tight, his lips pressed into a thin line. On impulse, Hermione combed his hair back from his forehead using her fingers. His eyes flew open at the touch, but he didn't move. Hermione was suddenly aware of the other times that she'd seen him like this, lying crumpled on the floor, vulnerable and defeated.

"I'll catch you," she repeated. "You ought to be able to trust me, too."

"Trust," he echoed quietly. He made no move to get up from the floor, simply lying half in her lap. Hermione had never seen him looking quite so lost, and she reached down to take his hand in hers.

"Tell me what's wrong, Severus," she implored.

His next words caused something painful to shift in her chest. "I'm not sure I know how to trust anymore."

"Then let me show you," she begged.

There was a light drizzle in Manchester, and Hermione was grateful for the litany of spells she had been forced to memorise. Warm, reasonably dry, and protected from the gusting wind that buffeted the trees, Hermione whispered the final spell Severus had taught her and stepped up into the air. She paused some ten feet from the ground and held out her hand, watching in delight as Severus swooped gracefully up to take it. There was a stomach jarring moment before her magic absorbed his weight, but then she had him.

Unlike her, Severus didn't apparently feel the need to hold on to her for dear life, but she could feel the tension in him even as he kept the lightest grasp on her hand. He allowed her to hold him in her magic for almost a minute before casting a *Volanti* of his own.

Almost sixty seconds of being completely and literally in her power.

He was much more dignified about it than she had been, but Hermione didn't doubt that it was every bit as difficult for him as it had been for her. Perhaps more so. She found it hard to trust the magic of others. He had placed his trust, his very life, in the hands of others, and been betrayed.

Hermione wondered if perhaps she might not be just the slightest bit in love with him.

They drifted for a while, hand in hand through the misty morning. Hermione kept expecting the overwhelming fatigue of yesterday to arrive, but when her magic continued to hold, she realised that she was somehow changeling her emotions into the spell. The combination of nerves, excitement and longing was apparently enough to keep her afloat.

She would ask Severus about it later. There was so much she wanted to ask him, but not yet.

They landed in the same clearing as before. The rain was falling steadily now and the long grass brushed her legs, soaking her trousers to the knee. They ought to head inside, she knew, but Hermione could not bring herself to end the almost dreamlike experience just yet.

Severus' hair was plastered to his scalp, but Hermione was certain hers had frizzed up around her face like a halo. She didn't care about either, not while his hand was still safe in hers.

"Close your eyes," she whispered.

And then she kissed him.

Hermione was certain that she could feel the slightest of tremors run through him as their lips met. Her legs felt unsteady after so much time aloft, and she knew if they continued they would end up sinking to the ground. The idea of sinking down amid the ferns and bracken sent a pulse of deep excitement through her, despite the cold and rain.

She parted her lips, willing him to deepen the kiss. He was hesitant at first, his tongue just brushing the seam of her lips. Hermione heard herself mewl in encouragement before losing herself in the warmth of his kiss.

He tasted like rain, rich, smoky magic and rising passion. Hermione wondered if he could discern the longing in her kiss and found herself hoping that he could. Her arms were around his neck, holding on for dear life, and his hands were pulling her ever closer.

It took a distant rumble of thunder for them to eventually pull apart. The rain was falling in sheets, and Hermione realised that the last of her Water Repelling Charms had failed, leaving her soaked through.

Severus Apparated them indoors. They arrived with a loud crack, and Hermione could feel the tell-tale tingle in her fingers of an almost *Splinch*. She smiled at the thought that Severus had been affected enough by the kiss for it to impact on his concentration. Her smile grew into an undignified beam when she realised that he hadn't returned them to the Ministry as she had expected, but had carried her back to his home.

They were in a little sitting room, with a squishy looking red sofa and low bookcases with sagging shelves. It was a nice room, with the slightly worn look of a place that is loved and lived in, a far cry from the bleak picture Harry had painted.

Hermione shivered slightly, and Severus flicked his wand at the fireplace before summoning a towel.

"Can I take your coat?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged out of her wet anorak and toed off her shoes, casting a quick drying charm at the hem of trousers before accepting a seat on the sofa and taking the proffered towel. It felt rather decadent to sit in front of a fire in summer time, but the warmth was already returning to her toes.

Severus returned from the hallway and graced her with a shy smile. "I could make cocoa," he offered. "If you like?"

"Come and sit down," she replied, patting the seat beside her. When he complied, she used the towel to wipe the last of the rain from his face before starting on his hair.

He didn't tell her that there was a simple charm that could do the job far better than she. He sat, eyes half closed, as she dried him. Then, taking back the towel, he did the same for her.

Chapter Eight and a half

Chapter 9 of 9

The Department of Mysteries has its own set of entrance criteria, but as Hermione is about to discover, it's not slaying a dragon. It's not even wrestling a troll. It's something far, far worse.

AN: Well, this is it. Thank you to every one who has taken the time to read this little fic - and to all of you who've been kind enough to leave reviews.

Super special thanks to TeddyRadiator for her inspiring prompt, Heartmom88 and Desigrl for their help throughout the writing of this ficlet, and to Nagandsev for providing that final polish.

Severus was deep in thought when he heard someone call his name. He turned to find Hermione hurrying to catch him, a smile of greeting on her lips. She was dressed in expensive looking robes, her hair neatly pinned. She looked nothing like the soggy girl in the anorak who had stolen a kiss from him in the middle of a summer storm.

But she still looked beautiful.

Severus stopped to wait for her and was surprised and rather pleased when she leant in to kiss him on the cheek.

"Were we supposed to meet?" he asked.

"No, I've got an appointment today." She fell in beside him. "I'll walk to the lifts with you, if you're going that way?"

"Are you alright?" he pressed.

"Not really," she replied. "In fact I think I might be sick. I'm due in the Department of Mysteries in exactly twenty minutes to complete my trial. Oh!" She laughed. "And I hoped I'd be able to tell you that! So you *do* work for the Mysteries?"

Severus took her hand in his, ignoring the dampness of her skin and focussing instead on the way her fingers twined themselves with his.

"Yes," he answered simply. "Apparently I do."

Hermione felt a lot less apprehensive entering the Mysteries for the third time. Having Severus by her side made it far easier to be unconcerned about the spinning walls or the numerous doorways. When Unspeakable Smith simply reached out and opened the nearest door, something clicked inside her head.

"They're a bit like the staircases at Hogwarts, aren't they? Only far, far more showy and capable of luring trespassers into odd areas of the department."

"I rather suppose they are," Smith agreed. "They have a more developed sense of humour, mind."

Severus, who hadn't spoken since they had entered the lift together, merely grunted, and Hermione realised that he was as nervous as she. She hadn't missed his comment upstairs and was becoming increasingly certain that he was about to complete a trial, too.

She looked around the room in interest. She'd been a bit too distracted to pay attention to anything other than the Device during her first visit, and she was surprised at how much it resembled a doctor's waiting room. The glamorous woman from before was still there, and Hermione realised that she hadn't the least idea what her name might be. Bartleby had probably introduced them before, but she had been in such a tizz that it could have been anything.

The Device loomed large above them, all polished brass, oversized glass valves and twitching dials. As she watched there was a loud whistle, and a jet of steam hissed from a spout near the top.

Hermione had the rather unpleasant feeling that it was showing off.

"So," asked Smith. "Who wants to go first?"

"Me!" squeaked Hermione before she'd even considered the question. It was the waiting around before an exam she had always hated the most. "Do I need to demonstrate?"

"No thanks," he replied. "Just the thought of flying like that is enough to give me the willies. Just pop your hand back in the receptacle and the Device will do the rest. Are we all ready, Hilary?"

Hermione would have been interested to know how he knew about her flying lessons, but before she could form the question, Hilary had taken her arm and was placing her hand back in the Device with the practical efficiency of the women who used to operate the foot measuring machine in Clarks. Her hand was laid out just so, her fingers stretched precisely until Hilary deemed their positioning to be suitable.

"Just try not to flinch," she advised kindly.

Hermione swallowed.

Severus watched as Hermione was led to the Device, his mind whirring.

"Miss Granger was able to tell me that she was coming here today to complete her trial. That would suggest that we had both already been accepted into the Department." He let his eyes flick to where Smith stood grinning. "That would suggest that any further involvement of the Device is purely arbitrary."

"Perhaps," Smith conceded. "But only if the Device was purely useful in the determining of the nature of the trials and their fulfilment."

"Ouch!"

Both men turned to face Hermione, who had just yanked her arm from the receptacle and was staring at her palm.

"It's a splinter wand," Hilary explained. "Very limited capability, but it functions as an all-purpose Alohamora. Mostly it will allow you to enter the Department without Bartleby here having to open the door for you each morning. We used to have enchanted rings, but they're a bit easy to steal once you know what you're looking for."

"Whereas this way someone would need to cut open your hand," Severus concluded. "Much better."

"I can't see anything," Hermione commented, holding her hand up to the light. "Even the redness is fading. A bit of warning might have been nice, though. There was a chance I might not have wanted an enchanted twig embedded in my flesh."

"That's generally why we don't tell people in advance," Smith agreed happily. "Your turn now, Professor."

Severus hesitated. The thought of momentary discomfort didn't bother him, but the idea of allowing an item of unknown magical power to be buried in his skin made him distinctly uncomfortable. Although a numbing charm and an Accio would be enough to remove the thing should it prove to be an annoyance.

He reached for Hermione's hand and cast a few revealing spells, just to ascertain that there was nothing immediately suspicious about the splinter. It was simply a clever unlocking spell anchored to a sliver of yew. It would probably make it possible to track who gained access to which rooms and when, but then Muggles had been doing the same thing for years. It probably tied in with the runes over the lintels.

"Severus?" Hilary prompted. "If you're ready?"

"Don't worry, it's not that bad," Hermione assured him. "Trust me."

"Oh," Severus replied, allowing Hilary to press his palm flat against the cool brass of the receptacle. "I do."