

Playing a New Game

by Ladymage Samiko

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Somewhere in England...though it could not be said precisely where...two people sat in reasonably amicable silence and ate their morning eggs and bacon. (The girl occasionally objected to this on the grounds of proper nutrition, but she was always overruled by one salient point: he was the only one of them who could cook, and unless it made her physically unwell, she would eat what he cooked or restrict herself to a morning cup of tea. She chose to eat the eggs and bacon.) Just as they were finishing the last bites, a very correct, very well-behaved owl flew through the open window, dropped a packet of letters upon the table, and landed on a perch placed precisely for that purpose. With an almost feline fastidiousness, Beelzebub began his drying off ritual, seeing as how the rain was loud enough to make a marching band's drums sound like a low murmur.

Long fingers picked up the packet...kept at the post office until Beelzebub specifically called for it...and sorted the letters, scrolls, and packages it contained. "Your ink has arrived," he remarked mildly, pushing a green-paper parcel in her direction, "and a few reminder notes from your professors...as if you needed them."

"Thanks," she replied. She sifted through the letters, sorting out which ones should be read immediately, and which could wait until later. "You've given me one of yours," she added, holding out the gilt-edged envelope.

"Burn it," he told her succinctly. "I have not seen it; I have not opened it; I do not know of its existence."

"It can't be *that* bad, surely." Her hand remained suspended in mid-air.

"If you doubt my judgment," he said with lofty superiority and a hint of 'you'll be sorry' sing-song, "you may open your own. *Then* will I allow you to tell me, 'It can't be that bad.'" He mimicked her intonation with the accuracy of long familiarity.

Frowning, she laid the envelope in the middle of the table, and found hers, addressed to '*Miss Hermione Granger, Spinner's End,, England*' in stiffly ornate, gold script. She opened it.

Miss Hermione Granger,

You are hereby invited to the Second Annual Victory Ball in celebration of the defeat of You-Know-Who, which will take place on the night of June 8, 200-, at seven

of the clock at the Ministry of Magic. Please respond to this invitation at your earliest convenience.

Committee for the Commemoration of the Glorious Victory.

There was a distinct aura of *'Fail at your own peril.'* Hermione grimaced. "Self-righteous arse-bastards."

He gave a shark-like grin. "Don't hold back out of consideration for my tender ears," he taunted. "Be thorough in your opinions."

She glared. The unspoken 'I told you so' was all the more galling when he was right. "If I go, you go," she said flatly.

A peculiar laugh-croak escaped his throat. "Not for all the bloody tea in China, Granger."

"I can always report that your health is precarious again, *Snape*," she riposted sweetly, "or that there's been a threat on your life, and I couldn't *possibly* come without you. *Something* might happen while I'm out of the house, you know."

It was Severus's turn to glare at the young witch. "Merlin only knows how I ended up saddled with *you*, Granger," he spat, rising and turning on his heel with all the drama she remembered from her school days. She smiled at the victory; even small ones were to be savoured when it came to Severus Snape.

To speak the truth, it had been a surprise to everyone...the principals included...when Hermione Granger and Severus Snape began living with each other. It was just after the war, and Snape had been at the end of his convalescence. His friends (well, sympathizers, at any rate) would not let him return to Spinner's End alone, lest he suffer a relapse alone, and his enemies (of whom there were many more) refused to trust him further than a mouse could throw him. Faced with an overabundance of piss-poor options (to quote him directly), he had selected Miss Granger as the least likely to drive him to either suicidal or homicidal mania...though he didn't truly hold out much hope for avoiding either. Hermione, at a loss for purpose in the post-war world, accepted with a mixture of determination, elation, and sheer panic. Considering the possible outcomes, she wrote and filed a last will and testament, believing that Snape in a homicidal mood would be far more likely to succeed where Voldemort had failed. With that last act of fatalism and a deep breath, she moved into Spinner's End.

Where, in spite of all the betting pools to the contrary, the unlikely pair got on rather well. Hermione stuck to her guns in matters of his medical treatment, but otherwise approached him very much as she would an unfamiliar Kneazle: she backed off, observed, and adjusted accordingly; it was his house, after all, and she a (barely tolerated) guest. When Snape discovered she wasn't going to pry, or prattle, or bully, or wheedle, he relaxed somewhat and returned the favour. Their only true arguments had been over the library, and they were generally resolved with the division of the shelves into his, hers, and a sort of biblio-Switzerland. Hermione was given freer rein over the house, and in partial repayment of her work, Severus began tutoring her in potions. By the time he was declared both healthy and vindicated, they had settled into routines that both of them were loathe to abandon. Snape found her a willing and intelligent pupil (in his words, 'a competent lackey'), and realised that the mere presence of another person in the house kept him from spiralling down into the depression and self-loathing that had dogged his existence for the past thirty-odd years. If nothing else, he had to be alert in case she tripped a security ward he had long since forgotten about. For her part, Hermione enjoyed the odd discussion with someone who was her intellectual equal, and though her task as nurse-cum-bodyguard had ended, she continued to feel a certain responsibility towards her erstwhile charge. Baffled, but delighted to be of service, the Hogwarts faculty had banded together and applied their magic to connecting Snape's house to the one next door and refurbishing both in the process. By the time they had finished, witch and wizard each had a house to live in, while sharing a kitchen (he cooked, she cleaned), a library (with former boundaries still in place), and a basement laboratory warded inside and out against everything up to and including a Vesuvian eruption.

Crookshanks, it may be added, ignored any sort of boundary and roamed freely throughout both residences, wards or no wards.

The majority of Hermione's day proved to be exceedingly tiresome. The Victory Ball was the primary topic of conversation for everyone; even her professors inquired as to who would be her escort and what she thought she might wear. And that was just at Oxford; the chatter and interrogation were multiplied tenfold when she arrived at the Ministry. She had the sneaking suspicion...which rapidly ballooned into depressing certainty...that The Committee was planning some sort of ceremony in which she would be expected to participate. Not even her weekly pint with the boys brought any relief from the relentless barrage; they'd brought Ginny and Lavender along with them, and whatever the differences might be between the two girls, they were both dead keen on the idea of a formal evening out. Neither Ron nor Harry could get a word in edgewise as the pair poked prodded and, in the face of her ignorance and defiance of her indifference, advised.

"There's always Gryffindor colours, of course," Ginny offered, only to be shot down by Lavender's derision.

"Rather trite, now that we're out of school, isn't it? And Hermione would look rubbish in yellow!"

"But ravishing in red," Ginny countered. "Besides, it's a commemorative event; recalling her House would be nice touch, /I think."

"You would look good in red." Lavender cocked her head, inspecting Hermione as an owl would a tasty...and still moving...morsel. "And you could wear silver if you didn't want to be *too* obvious about it. Shame that wearing green is definitely *out*." Hermione, face buried in her pint of cider, was grateful for the prop; she didn't want Lavender to see the question that came to mind, for asking just why green was out would be humouring the girl and probably end with her being dragged off to see whatever fashion mags the magical community produced.

And Great Circe, she'd probably want to poke out her eyes after five minutes of that.

Fortunately for her curiosity and her self-respect, Ginny was still in girly frou-frou mode. "It's a shame for me," she mourned. "I look so gorgeous in green. But with the war... and Slytherin... well, you know." Ah, so that was it. And school colours were 'trite,' were they?

"We're discussing Hermione, Ginevra Weasley, not you." An evil eye was instantly replaced with that owl-and-morsel look again. "Purple might be nice," she said generously. "Something nice and rich; pastels would look ghastly on you."

"But that would depend..." Ginny ventured. "I mean, she's not..."

Both girls' heads swivelled, and two gimlet stares affixed her to her seat. Hermione silently debated loosening her wand in its sheath. The boys had long since abandoned her (cowards!) and were merely observing the 'girl talk' from the safety of the bar.

"Who's taking you?" they demanded in unison.

Hermione sighed. "No one," she told them, repeating the same thing she had said to her Arithmancy Tutor, her fellow students, Mr. Weasley, the various Ministry Ladies who had just 'popped in,' her supervisor... She felt safe enough here in adding, "I daresay Severus and I will share a Portkey, but he's not *taking* me...or vice-versa." The laughter that followed her statement was only surpassed in insult by the pitying looks the two girls gave her after.

"Oh, Hermione, *again?*" Ginny exclaimed. "Is it that difficult to find someone *human* to take you?"

"Really, Hermione!" Lavender chimed in. "It was all very well and good when Snape was ill, and you needed to look after him, but bringing him now is... Well, it's really rather pathetic. I'm sure there'd be masses of boys who'd be willing to ask you if you'd just make a bit of an effort. How hard can that be?"

Hermione realised her hand was gripping the pint glass rather as though it were someone's neck; she did *not* realise that her magic was making fractures in a glass

specifically spelled for durability. "Has it occurred to you," she said pleasantly, "that I don't want a *boy*? Particularly if I have to get one on those terms? That I'm happy with myself and my life and I'm not going to make myself into something I'm not just for some adolescent prat?"

She rose and swigged down the remainder of her drink. "I'm Hermione Bloody Granger," she said, eyes sparking, "and if that's not 'girly' enough for you, then fuck you both." She tossed a few Knuts on the table. "I'll see you two next week," Hermione told Harry and Ron, adding, with a significant glance at the two speechless witches, "or not, as the case may be."

A walk across London wore down some of the anger, and Hermione managed to re-establish some sort of equilibrium before she headed home. Still, she was not up for a shared evening in the library, nor yet duelling practise in the basement; just one little jab from her housemate and she might end up casting an Unforgivable. And it wouldn't be his fault...at least, not for anything more than being the casual bastard that he had always been. She'd gotten used to that when he *had* meant what he said, when he had been ill and in pain and ready to lash out at everyone under the sun...and at quite a few who weren't. She'd learned when to take him seriously and to give as good as she got.

Just... not tonight.

Hermione hung her hat neatly and placed her shoes precisely where she always did before going upstairs and taking refuge in her numbers; Arithmancy was such a *logical* branch of wizardry, or at least as logical as magic ever proved itself to be. Hunting down a rogue *i* that kept leaping about her equations was a soothing process for her, and by the time she pinned it down with a *chi* and bisected it with a *yoh*, the young woman had ordered herself well enough to probe why she had been so emotional. She'd tried; she *had* tried. She was a young woman, after all, and she was interested in the male sex. (She'd pondered the alternatives at one point and concluded quite definitively that they weren't for her.) Ron had been a complete washout as a lover; while she'd fully expected to shed her virginity with him, he'd never evinced the sort of passion she thought the process needed. His attempts had been sloppy...mechanical at best...and failed to inspire anything more in her than the affection she'd started out with. She was young, she admitted, and entirely inexperienced, but, well, she'd done better on her own. And so she'd broken the "romance" off before it got past a few wet kisses and painfully uncomfortable gropes.

He'd been disappointed, but had more or less come to the same conclusion as she.

The witch sighed, adding another *mu* to expand her equation beyond the arc of the cosinal \hat{h} . It had been equally painful to realise that boys of her generation were without exception equally incompetent and further, saw her as a untouchable goddess, an asexual academe, or as a medal-decorated trophy fuck. At least *Ron* had *cared*. And now she knew that the girls...one of whom was supposed to be a *friend*...saw her in very much the same way...as though being intelligent, outspoken, and ambitious made her somehow *less* than a woman.

Well, she was Hermione Granger, she *was* a woman, and she was damn well going to find a man who could deal with her on those terms. And the rest could go hang themselves.

Hermione stopped short, her pencil poised over an innocent, mundane 6.

A man.

Perhaps *that* was the crux of the matter.

She had, unsurprisingly, looked to her contemporaries for companionship, and they were still...war notwithstanding...very much boys who had yet to grow up. Perhaps she needed someone older, more mature...more intelligent. After all, look at how well she got on with Severus.

Well, maybe he wasn't the best example. She combined the six with a *menos* to produce a hybrid half. Severus Snape could not be considered typical by any standard. But then, she frowned, taking an absolute value of *phi*, she got on well with a number of grown wizards, and very few of them could be grouped into any sort of 'normal' category. Wizards, particularly after a certain age, didn't seem to do 'normal.' (And that wasn't even beginning to consider Professor Dumbledore, who was light years away from any sort of norm and equally well beyond the limits of merely 'odd' or 'eccentric'.)

But she *did* get on with them. And while she hadn't thought of them in *that* way, she had to admit that once she'd adjusted her thinking, there were several she considered quite... attractive.

Hermione finished her equation with a flourish, pleased to see the red glow that indicated that her work was properly balanced. Setting it aside, she pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and her favourite, brass-tipped quill pen. She had a list to make, and possibilities to whittle down.

Severus scowled. He hated being blackmailed into... into anything, to be honest, but into being *sociable* was particularly abhorrent. He was not sociable. People, by and large, were not sociable with *him*. He had few friends, more enemies, and a great many who simply detested him for being and/or looking like the way he was. He'd had a few *liaisons* over the past few years...a benefit of being exonerated and, to a point, lionized...but these had been simple, clear-cut interactions just shy of being business transactions. Severus saw little point in pursuing anything more...not, as the papers would have it, because of some enduring obsession, but because he was old enough to realise that 'more' didn't exist. Not for him. He was too old, too ugly, and had the temper of a dragon in moulting season. Women wanted young, handsome, and charming...as exemplified by that prat, Lockhart, and amply demonstrated elsewhere. Failing young/handsome/charming, they wanted wealthy, and *that* sort of witch... well, he didn't want to spend any more of his life waiting for hexes in the back or tasting his morning porridge for poisons. So he didn't bother looking for something that was as mythical as those snoozy-bark-whatsits Lovegood was always on about.

But that was what these events were for. Ergo, he was being forced into an activity that was long, tedious, unpleasant, and ultimately pointless. *Snape* had to be (somewhat) polite. He had to stand around and be talked at by people who would much rather throw the lamentably non-alcoholic punch in his face. He had to remember to hex the balls off of Kingsley as soon as he could surreptitiously manage it.

"Still intent on frightening small children, Severus?" Lucius, immaculate as always...though without the sharply polished edge that had characterised his antebellum self...slid into place alongside his friend and erstwhile comrade.

"Shacklebolt put the ball-screws on you, as well, Lucius?" Snape returned idly. They both knew the answer to that one. Granger hadn't really needed to practise her juvenile efforts at blackmail.

"We're trophies, the two of us," the blond said, "like a bloody pair of heads stuck on the wall or laid out as rugs on the floor for the populace to gawk at." He sipped at his drink, finishing the strong liqueur with deceptive speed. It was the only way he had discovered to manage these little public events without incurring the wrath of whomever had strong-armed him into appearing in the first place. He had to admit that Severus helped. Theirs was a mutually beneficial arrangement whereby they watched each other's backs, literally and metaphorically, until the earliest possible moment of escape.

Gods, he missed his wife.

"By the by, where's your keeper, Severus?" he asked in a deceptively smooth tone.

Severus refused to give him the satisfaction of visibly bristling. "Late," he replied laconically. "Ministry proto-lackey, Lucius." Granger, being the overachieving swot that she was, felt she had to *earn* money as well as attend Oxford. He hoped for her sake that she would realise the cesspool nature of the government by the time she took her GAFFEs* and was eligible to apply for a full-time, forty-year contract of deliberately vague wording. He wasn't sure what would be better for her, but there had to be something for a young woman who could act the goody-two-shoes, hex authority figures into swivets, swear like a sailor's mother, and duel like a Ravenclaw. (It was the often overlooked asset...or flaw...that Ravenclaws were inclined to set morals aside when pursuing research; he'd already taught Granger a number of unclassified curses, and they'd developed several more. In the name of academic advancement. Naturally.)

"Ah, I see..." Lucius drawled. "But she is engaged to attend?"

"Would she do anything else?" he countered. Snape eyed his cohort suspiciously. "An unusual line of inquiry for you, Lucius."

The blond shrugged elegantly. "I have... an interest, you might say."

"She lives under my roof, Lucius." The tiniest note of warning.

"Semantics. And I have nothing malevolent in mind, Severus."

Now why was it that Severus didn't believe that?

Hermione's entrance did not go unnoticed. To her dismay, she was surrounded almost immediately after she entered the hall. Some were admirers of The Great Hermione Granger. Others were practically professional schmoozers, who believed that garnering her interest would push them a rung or two...or twenty...up the Ministry ladder. A few were trying to sell her various services, from potions to witch's hats. And then there were the cats in their little groups, watching her and sizing her up and tearing her down amongst themselves, simply because of the attention she was receiving. It was the price of fame, fame she had never sought, and she hated paying for something she'd never intended to buy.

The young woman slipped through the gaggle of people with as much speed as she could manage while still being reasonably polite. For once, she had a distinct purpose in coming tonight. She'd made her lists and had thought her way through a great many Arithmantic equations. And she'd come to certain conclusions.

Those conclusions, she realised uneasily, were standing together. They'd placed themselves...deliberately, she knew...against a wall, very near both the bar and an exit. Some habits, she thought with a nervous mental giggle, died hard.

Circe, they looked good. Lucius had taken to wearing the greys and dusky violets of half-mourning in the time since Narcissa Malfoy's death, and his pale skin and hair glowed against the raw silk of his robes. There was a sternness to his features and a softening of those cold, grey eyes that had not been there before the final stages of the war. They looked well on him; the dilettante had matured. And, if one was inclined to judge by shallower standards, he had also kept up his figure, the broad solidity of his shoulders tapering to a waist that was still in fighting trim. Unless, and here was another silent giggle, he resorted to male corsetry.

And Severus. The sleek raven to Malfoy's white peacock. The black was so like his usual attire that Hermione couldn't blame other people for thinking that there was no difference. But he was so familiar to her now that she recognised the slight concessions to formality: the hair that was properly washed, cut, and tamed, the robes that were expensive *tsukinowa* silk and tailored to a millimetre of perfection. Was she the only person who noticed the hint of gold silk at his wrists, gold that complemented the yellow tones of his skin and drew attention to the long, capable hands?

Oh, if only she could escape these miserable sycophants!

"New one's come in." Snape jerked his chin at the cluster of sycophants swarming around the entrance to the hall. "Fame or figure?" he queried...an old game by now, sadly.

Lucius pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Fame, two galleons," he declared. "Look at all the little Ministry grubs trying to grovel."

"They don't do that for mere beauty," Snape agreed, a little annoyed at the prospect of losing of two galleons. "It takes more than an nice arse to inspire that level of kissing." Still, his eyes roved the assembly, attempting to deduce who the woman ought to be. The Hogwarts contingent was already present; they had a tendency to arrive in a body, herded by the ever-formidable Minerva. The Weasleys did as well (ditto by the equally formidable Molly) and were already ensconced in a large corner of the hall, a sizeable pack of puppies tumbling over each others' laps. Lovegood, the Patils, several Bloodgoods and Spellnibs...

"Severus!" Lucius hissed, and he looked back to the huddle, which had parted enough for the young lady in question to be seen. If the two men had been any less dignified, their jaws would have gaped. She was Hermione Granger. Frizzy-haired, ink-nosed Hermione Granger. Snape recalled with some difficulty her appearance that morning, her hair twisted and shoved into her hat, which had several quills tucked into the band, and the rest of her shrouded by the academic poplin required by her college.

"Medusa's scaly tits!" he swore. "When did that girl get an arse?"

Lucius quirked an amused lip, but had to admit...if only to himself...that his thoughts were running along the same lines. The young woman had been very much at a disadvantage the last time he had seen her: smudged and bruised and with hair resembling some tribal creature from deepest, darkest Africa. This evening was a Donkeyskin transformation. Gone were the dirt, blood, tears, and frazzled singe. In their place were a light, fluffy coronet of honey-coloured hair and elegant robes in layers of dark malachite and deep ocean shades. They draped and caressed her curves, the curves of a maiden's slight breast and a woman's hips and thighs. Lucius sighed softly; he remembered his wife at that age, a princess ready to become a queen.

Hermione, young and vital and unconcerned with the trivial social rules, appeared ready to become an empress.

An empress, perhaps, worthy of a Malfoy.

At least for a weekend.

Not for the first time, Hermione wished that her personality included the level of rudeness that Severus was routinely capable of, but eventually, she was able to extract herself from the people she did not want to talk to and spend a few minutes each with those she genuinely liked. Now... now she hesitating. It wasn't like her, and she knew it. She tried telling herself it wasn't *that* important. Another part of her replied tartly that how did she know whether or not a *liaison* would end up being important and how did she know whether or not it would happen in the first place? It wasn't as though she *really* knew what she was doing, and neither man had ever evinced any interest in her before...not on that level, anyway. Severus was a *friend*, for Circe's sake! What if she ended up with him tonight and it ruined everything she'd spent the last few years building? And Malfoy... Who ever knew what Lucius Malfoy wanted, and wasn't it rather disturbing anyway that she fancied him? At least, she thought with some humour, she wasn't interested in Draco. Whatever happened, he was still a prat. But what did it say about her that she was interested in his *father*?

Well, she was in for it now. She'd made her decision, and she was going to stick to it. Besides, they were meandering towards her...in indirect, Slytherin fashion...right now. Hermione looked up at Severus and smiled. "Good evening, Severus. You look very elegant this evening! And Mr. Malfoy, impeccable as always."

"Miss Granger." Lucius bowed over her hand in the correct fashion, lips just brushing the skin. Her hand shook slightly, and a smug smile graced his features when he rose.

"We are as nothing compared to the aura of power and beauty that surrounds you this evening."

In spite of herself, Hermione blushed. So what if his speeches were as rehearsed as a Shakespearian actor's lines? "You don't really mean it," she told him bluntly, "but it's nice to hear, anyway." And for her, so very rare. When was the last time even her parents had called her beautiful?

"Is it of any purpose to contradict you, my dear Miss Granger? For I do, in fact, 'mean it' quite sincerely. And please, call me Lucius. You are quite grown up, you know."

"Do you." She felt off-balance, wrong-footed already. Hermione had expected to need time to capture their interest, change their minds about how they saw her...which, she imagined, was still as an immature child. But while Severus was his usual impassive self, Mr. Malfoy...*Lucius*...looked every inch the large, sleek cat ready to pounce. It was a heady, almost frightening feeling.

"Lucius..." Severus's tone, while mild, was not exactly friendly.

"Do you tell me you do not agree with me, Severus?" Lucius asked with mild, affected surprise. "Has Miss Granger not grown from a gawky girl-child to a lovely young witch?"

Snape bit back his knee-jerk reply, which would be to say that she was as yet the same gawky girl-child. But it would be untrue, and she deserved better from him. "I quite agree that she...*you*...look quite lovely this evening, Hermione. Washing the ink stains off your hands and face does wonders for your appearance," he added bitingly. He was still Severus Snape, after all.

"Thank you, Severus," she beamed, well aware that he was practically compelled to add his grain of salt. "Yes, I thought the ink a trifle inappropriate for the evening. I've still got a quill in my purse, though," she added lightly. "I assume yours is in your pocket?"

Lucius chuckled. "I am certain it is, Miss Granger, though I have not had occasion to check. Tell me, do the two of you expect inspiration to strike suddenly over the course of the interminable speech-making? Or do you merely plan to play Staves and Brooms on a spare bit of tablecloth?"

"Both," they replied, equally bland. He laughed.

"Come, then," he said. "Let us find seats, and Severus and I can teach you how to play with three people." He placed a guiding arm about her waist.

"Three?" Hermione said. The wizard's words, though almost certainly meant innocently, opened up a whole new and intriguing possibility. "I hadn't realised that Staves and Brooms could be played with three people."

Severus had shifted round to her other side, though he kept his hands to himself. "Oh, Lucius is quite fond of three-player games," he drawled, and Hermione was very nearly certain that he meant what she *thought* he meant and it wasn't only her hormones that were interpreting *double entendres* where there weren't any.

"Does he?" she said a trifle stupidly, then recovered. "And what about you, Severus? Do *you* enjoy three players?"

"I don't believe Severus has ever tried playing with three, my dear," Lucius informed her. "Though he knows the rules, naturally." His arm slowly travelled until he was flirting around the edge of propriety, and he was delighted when her cheeks crimsoned once more but she made no reference to the intimacy.

Instead, she remarked. "Well, then, the two of you will have to teach me the rules, and we shall see if I think I'll enjoy the game."

"Marvellous." Lucius smiled.

The dinner and following speeches were, in fact, as interminable as predicted, and the situation was not helped by Hermione's increasing awareness of the men who bracketed her at the high table. There was nothing overt, nothing so crass as a hand on her knee or a chair shifted close, but somehow Hermione *knew* that both men were interested in her, interested in *that way*, just as she had dreamed, wanted, and never really expected to achieve. Lucius was the more assured, the more... flamboyant, perhaps. Severus was giving off a slightly protective air. Not... not territorial, precisely, but there was a slight tension there between himself and Lucius that every so often caused Lucius to back off, particularly when she was feeling out of her depth.

"And then, Hermione," Lucius murmured under the amplified voice of the current speech-maker, "you draw your broom to the left...would you, Severus?...and thereby cross the staves, which must then scramble to retain their positions." The young witch shivered slightly as his words whispered along her cheek and ear, and then at the warmth of Severus's fingers along hers as he complied with Lucius's request, guiding her hands in the quill movements for Staves and Brooms. Fortunately, she thought, most things were being hidden by Lucius's adept casting of an illusion.

"I have a question," she whispered, and she felt rather than heard the chuckle from beside her.

"What else is new?" queried Severus.

"Have you ever played with two brooms and a stave, Lucius?" She kept her eyes wide and innocent as she looked into his.

He smiled. "I have, indeed, young Hermione," he confirmed. "And in... larger games, as well, though I am much better pleased with this sort of... intimacy."

"It's a game best played when you trust your opponents, isn't it?" she agreed. "No... unpleasant surprises."

"In such games, surprises cease to be unpleasant, Hermione," Severus added, his voice a low rumble. "They become challenges. Delights."

"I'm still a new player," Hermione cautioned. Better to have it out now, if everything was leading where she thought it was. "Untried, so to speak." There was no way to miss the surprise that flitted across Lucius's face, though Severus was far more sanguine.

"My dear girl, how utterly marvellous!" Lucius's smile was broad and seemingly genuine. "This is indeed a delightful surprise. I promise you, we shall proceed with our instruction with all due care and consideration."

"Hermione," and there was an urgency that brought her full attention to her erstwhile professor. "Hermione, are we playing for keeps this evening?"

"I don't know," she told him honestly. "I want this. I want... I want to *know*. There's so much I don't, and until I do... I don't know what stakes we're playing for tonight. I don't even know Mr.... *Lucius*...that well. I know I want to learn; I want to enjoy and be enjoyed." She smiled impishly. "I want to scream the roof down, Severus. Beyond that...beyond tonight...all I know is that I don't want to lose a friend."

There was warmth in the sardonic gleam of his eye. "Understood." He glanced over her head at Lucius, and the blond narrowed his eyes in agreement to the unspoken terms.

With Lucius's assistance, they Apparated directly into the heart of Malfoy Manor as soon as they could extract themselves from the festivities. Once there, he immediately summoned a House Elf...much to Hermione's annoyance...and whispered instructions to the creature. Severus removed Hermione's light dress cloak himself, and took the opportunity to press a kiss to the back of her neck. Little darts of sensation radiated from the site, and a tiny sound escaped her throat.

Lucius, in his rôle as host, sent a candelabra bobbing ahead and led the other two through the corridors of the manor. Hermione, though distracted by the heat of Severus's arm under her hand, could not help but feel a sense of emptiness and disuse, despite the impeccable cleanliness left by the house elves. Further, she noticed that it was entirely unlike any of the rooms she had... been in... before... and this made her more comfortable than she could be, under the circumstances.

We are in the heart of the Manor," Severus murmured in her ear. "Meant only for the family... and trusted friends."

Lucius seemed possessed of extraordinarily sharp hearing. "This portion of the house is what remains of the original structure built by Sage de Malfoi when she was granted land by William the Conqueror," he remarked.

"Is that supposed to impress me, Mister Malfoy?" Hermione asked tartly, seeing the twitching of Severus's lips.

The blond wizard slanted a glance back at her. "Does it?" he inquired, and the childish amusement was apparent. Hermione smiled back.

"I hate to admit that it does," she confessed. "To know, really *know*, where you came from. To realise all of the generations that have dedicated themselves to maintaining your family and patrimony." Her smile became a grin. "Of course, they may have been evil bastards and blackguards, the lot of them, but it still means something."

The cool grey of Lucius's eyes warmed with humour and appreciation. He became truly voluble as they continued through, pointing out portraits and heirlooms, places where this spell had been invented and that death had occurred, and it was not with the boasting self-importance that Hermione was more inclined to associate with the aristocratic wizard but a distinct pride of house and family that explained much more truly of who he really was.

Severus was largely silent, watching the increasingly animated exchange and wondering if he had lost the game before it had even actually begun. Hermione was not a superficial person, but her appreciation of Lucius's person was ever more apparent, and his material possessions only gilded the lily. What did he, Severus, have to offer beyond their prickly, everyday friendship? It might be better for him to bow out now and salvage what he could in the morning...or whenever Lucius let her go. But he was still uncertain of his friend's motives; the wizard could disguise much behind that bantering façade. Severus allowed himself the smallest of sighs. He seemed fated to set aside his own wants to look after the welfare of the young.

And then Hermione took his hand in her free one and lifted it to her lips. Lucius was still going on about something or other, but he didn't hear because the girl was kissing his hand, her tongue caressing the skin that stretched taut over his second knuckle, right where he had scraped it during a bout with her the week before. Her thumb glided along another small potions scar, and he recalled strongly all the times she had cared for him and how familiar she must be with his body...and how unfamiliar he was with hers. He stared, absorbing the extraordinary gaze that was both the honest, inquiring Hermione of his everyday experience and the seductive, capable Hermione who had appeared this evening. "I want this," she whispered to him. "I want *you*."

His lips curled. "But will you still respect me in the morning?" he half-teased.

"Only as much as I already do," she returned lightly.

"Which is to say, not at all." He sighed theatrically. "Are you certain you want to go through with this, Lucius?"

"Even an armed truce is better than open war. And now, if you please...?" He gestured to a door. "We have arrived, most honoured guests."

Hermione anchored herself once more on Severus's arm, and they both entered. Once inside, she gasped; Lucius had brought them to a library, and the soothing scents of parchment, leather, and wood enveloped her as she took in the tiny witch lights that floated in the air even to the heights of the distant ceiling. A assortment of cushions, pillows, and blankets lay in the middle of the room, a decadent pool in the midst of an oasis. "Lucius, you didn't have to..."

He placed a finger over her lips. "A lady should be treasured," he murmured, "and a gift honoured." He leaned in, replacing his fingers with a kiss, and Hermione's senses reeled. Lucius was practiced, assured, and she was more than content to follow his lead.

So this is what it's supposed to feel like.

Severus excused himself after a brief interval.

At Hermione's confused and slightly hurt expression, Lucius explained, "Severus is by no means a voyeur, my dear, and while we don't doubt your... enthusiasm or abilities, three is still considered advanced play. He'll return later."

"And how did you decide who's first?" she asked with some asperity. "Flip a coin? Draw straws?"

He looked puzzled, but said mildly, "He doesn't want to hurt you, Hermione, and in this instance, it's inevitable."

"Wha... oh. And you don't mind?"

Lucius waved a dismissive hand. "It is, as I say, inevitable." He approached, and his fingers began to play with the neckline of her robes. "And I believe with both agree that this is best handled by someone who knows what he's doing."

Hermione reached up hesitantly, daring herself to touch his cheek, draw her hands over the slight roughness of his jaw. He leaned into the caress. "And *you* know what you're doing?" she queried, tilting her head.

"A treasure and a gift, Hermione," he spoke into her ear. "I know your value far better than any *boy* you might have chosen. I know how to handle precious creatures." His hands began to demonstrate, flowing gently over her waist and hips, returning to her breast, delicately pressing where before she had received only rough manhandling. She moaned, then gasped when he nipped at her earlobe. "My roof is fairly solid, Miss Granger," he told her softly, recalling her earlier words, "but we'll do our best," and here he nipped again, gently, "to bring it down."

He was a surprisingly slow, sensuous lover, Hermione discovered. He had never struck her as an especially patient man or a considerate one. And perhaps that would change over time, if they remained lovers. But this evening, he took his time, savouring her, tending to her pleasure long before his own. He explored her body, discovering with her that she liked her nipples pinched gently and shuddered violently when he licked slowly up her spine. He seemed fascinated by her lower curls, petting and tangling his fingers in them while she squirmed impatiently beneath hands that refused to delve further in. He gave her only the briefest chance of returning the favour; she had done little more than remove his robes and take him tentatively in her hands before he distracted her yet again, this time experimenting with how she liked her clitoris to be rubbed. Lucius brought her to orgasm three...was it three? she had lost count...times before he finally poised himself between her thighs, having built her up once more to an indolent excitement. *This is definitely considered hedonism*, she told herself muzzily, reaching up with both arms and legs to pull him closer. He obliged.

The roof may have remained intact, but it wasn't for lack of trying...on either side.

She awoke slowly, revelling in the soft warmth of the blankets around her, absorbing the feeling of a possessive hand draped over her shoulders. She identified her pillow as a man's thigh, then frowned slightly; it was thinner, bonier than she thought Lucius's would be. "Severus?" she mumbled. The hand tightened, and she opened her eyes blearily. *His nose looks massive from this angle* was her first thought; he was seated, his back against the base of a chair, while he pillowed her head in his lap. His free

hand dangled from along the seat, holding a book open to the page he must have been reading.

"You may go back to sleep, if your wish," and his voice shivered through her.

"No," she replied quietly. "I want to be awake. Lucius?"

His lip curled, but she didn't know at whom he was directing his mockery. "The master has retired from the field," he drawled. "Do you wish him back again?"

"That's not what I meant," she objected. "I was just wondering. I don't *expect* to fall asleep with one man and wake up with another...particularly one who's obviously been here a while." She nodded at the book. He stilled.

"No," he said, more to himself than her, "you wouldn't." He brushed a curl back from her face. "This is your night, Hermione. What would you have of me?"

She smiled and drew her hand out from beneath the thick blanket. He had already disrobed, and she drew a light touch across his chest, taking in the texture of his hair, the shimmery feeling of his scars, the light ridges of his nipples. With a bit of manoeuvring, she raised herself to a sitting position beside him, looking directly into his face. He was, she thought dispassionately, definitely unlovely; the gods had done him no favours there. But there was depth and intensity there, and she was determined to explore them. "I want to learn you, Severus. I want *you* to learn *me*." She felt him lay the book down carefully upon the chair, felt his hands clasp her waist.

And then he pounced.

Making love with Severus was extraordinary, like being in the middle a tempest and knowing that she was, nevertheless, entirely safe. There was no trepidation here, no nervous tension, just heated, enthusiastic exploration of each other's bodies. Hermione felt his hands everywhere: in her hair, pinning her arms, clasping her breasts, gripping her buttocks, tickling her feet. He kissed her as though he would pour his entire soul into her, and she explored his mouth with equal fervour, running her tongue over his thin lips and mapping every millimetre of his uneven teeth. In a playful moment, she even nibbled up along the bridge of his nose and was rewarded with a deep chuckle. Severus was surprisingly open with his body...a recognition of the times she had already seen most of it?...and Hermione took full advantage in return. His balls felt heavy in her hand. He groaned deeply when she clasped the base of his penis with one hand and manipulated his foreskin with the other. When she placed her mouth around the tip and pressed her tongue against the slit, he gripped her shoulders so tightly, she was certain of the bruises. And then he yanked her up along his body and kissed her again. They gave and took and gave again until Hermione could no longer register whether it was his fingers or his tongue or if he was really even a separate being. In the end, she decided it didn't really matter.

Hermione was certain, quite certain, that there were no bones or muscles left in her body. If a Dark wizard had slammed open the door, the best she would be able to do would be to give him a silly, sated grin. If a flood somehow breached the manor's walls, she would have to be carried out by a troop of house elves.

She hoped both Lucius and Severus felt the same.

Severus was still stretched out beside her, his last movement having slung a blanket over both of them. "Have you made a choice, Hermione?" he asked, his voice deceptively idle. "Myself? Lucius? In tandem? Neither?"

"Mmm," came the contented sound. Apparently she had just enough energy to turn her head and kiss the tip of his nose. "I'll tell you in the morning, Severus."

"It is morning," was his dry reply.

"Well, then, I'll let you know this afternoon. Good night...morning...Severus."

Story notes:

Tsukinowa are very rare (and very apocryphal) demon silk moths.

GAFFES: God Awful Finally Final Exams. The graduating requirements for a witch or wizard to receive Mastery at university.

Author notes:

This little fic was written for the 2014 HP Cross Gen Fest on lj. I chose the following prompt..."Hermione is quickly approaching her 20th birthday and thinks it's high time she loses her virginity. She doesn't want boys (Harry or Ron). She wants a man." (thank you, Irthunder!)...and I lived to regret it. Trying to write this was like trying to tease a single strand out of a tangled yarn ball and continually finding the wrong one. Eventually, I got this one out. I'm still not entirely happy with it; my plans were scotched by my eternal need to justify the situation with back story, and as a result, the smut was severely curtailed. *sigh* Ah, well. It's happened before, and I suppose I should know better by now.

But don't mind me. I truly do hope that you enjoyed this little fic, and humbly request that, an it please thee so to do, you leave a little token in the box below. Thank you!