

One Very Good Thing

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer/Warning: Not mine. Damn. A followup to "Speak Now," which is mine. Except for the people you already knew. Read that first, or this will spoil it for you. My deepest thanks to the ever-amazing sshg316 for fast, detailed, thoughtful, and incredibly supportive betaing. I love Shug even more than I love Severus and Hermione!

"What are the penalties for breaking a magical wedding vow?"

She had asked the question casually, quietly, in the same sort of voice one asks about the weather.

He studied her for a moment, forcing himself to match her nonchalance. "Why?" he inquired at last, not quite trusting himself to get out more than the single syllable. It might, after all, just be a simple question.

She reached for something unidentifiable from an hors d'oeuvres plate as it floated past. "Curious." She shrugged. "Would the groom explode if he cheated on his wife? Would he be turned into a newt or something?"

Snape took a sip of the very bad champagne as he wondered how to respond. "Are you planning to experiment with Mr. Weasley?" he inquired languidly after a moment. "His vows are only minutes old."

Hermione looked at him sharply. Had she detected the minuscule tremor in his voice? "Good lord, no!" she replied. "I wasn't--" she sputtered to a halt.

"Really?" he purred. "Then the rumors weren't true?"

She had turned a sweet shade of pink. "Rumors? What . . . what have you heard?"

He took another sip of what, he decided, was really execrable champagne. "You kissed him. Rather publicly. 'A right good snog,' from the reports I heard."

Her hands flapped in front of her now quite dark red face. "It was . . . a long time ago," she managed to say. "In the heat of the battle. It didn't . . ." Her voice trailed off, as she evidently had no idea how to finish her sentence.

"Hmm," he replied, secretly delighted but unwilling to share the fact. "Then you are here as a supportive friend." He managed to make it sound like an insult.

Her eyes narrowed. "More to the point, why are you here?" she asked, glaring up at him.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he responded, allowing his voice to sink to a silky whisper.

"You hate Ron, the bride wasn't a Slytherin, you've been safely dead to most of the wizarding worldpick one," she recited. "Don't tell me you came for the wine."

He set down his glass, giving up on its contents. "Assuredly not," he admitted, but he eyed her with sudden suspicion.

"What?" she asked, taken aback at his look.

He reached into his robes, and she flinched involuntarily, but all he withdrew from them was a small parchment. "You sent it," he said simply. "Did you intend it as an insult or were you just being excessively polite?"

She looked at the invitation in his hands, her face a blank. "I didn't," she denied. "I had nothing to do with the guest list. Why would I . . . ?" And again her voice trailed off.

"Indeed," he replied. "Why would you?"

The hold her teeth now had on her lower lip threatened to draw blood. Her eyes flicked toward his, and he drew back as though he had been struck.

"Murder, Miss Granger?" he hissed sharply. "Rather extreme, don't you think?"

She looked at him, startled. "How did you--" she began, and then she relaxed. "Justifiable homicide," she announced, summoning what dignity she could. "Excuse me a moment, would you?" She straightened her back and whirled around.

He watched as she searched the crowd dancing in the center of the room and then honed in on one particular head of red hair. From where he stood, he just caught the beginning of her words--"Ginny? May I talk to you?"--before the swell of music drowned out the soft steel of her voice.

He allowed himself to study her back and the glimpses of her profile that he knew so well. How had this happened? When had it come upon him? At what moment had he fallen hopelessly in love with this impossible, insufferable, unbearable girl? And whatever could he do about it?

He drew a terrified breath. Instincts honed by years as a spy told him there were four conventional exits to the room, plus a few magical options. He could simply withdraw. He had become very good at that since the war. That way lay safety. Keeping his eyes locked on the back of Hermione's head, he started to edge slowly toward the east door.

And the back of his calf suddenly met with resistance. He froze.

"You do know what I've said about you, don't you?" came a very quiet voice at his shoulder.

Potter. There was no mistaking that voice.

He did not turn around. He did not deign to acknowledge Harry's presence at all. But he did stop moving toward the door.

Harry took a step around Snape to stand next to him. Snape was still staring directly at Hermione, and Harry followed his gaze. "I've told pretty much everyone who will listen," he continued, "that you're the bravest man I've ever known. Not very true at the moment, though, is it?"

Snape slid his eyes slowly to meet Harry's, managing to turn his expression into a smirk in the process. "I believe you have mistaken me for someone who gives a damn." His lips curled into a sneer.

Harry shrugged. "Of course, it's one thing to face down powerful wizards, poisonous snakes, or even death itself, isn't it? Quite another to admit you're in love."

Snape's face went deathly still. Harry was looking up at him, and Snape detected no evidence of mockery in his gaze, but anything was possible. After a heartbeat, Snape managed to cock one eyebrow. "Are you in love, Mr. Potter? How charming."

Harry's lips quirked. "As a matter of fact, I am. So I understand."

"Do you? How nice for you." Snape began to turn away, facing the door head on, his escape now almost within reach.

But Harry put out his hand and touched Snape's forearm gently. "Don't be an ass," he said very softly.

Snape lowered his head and matched Harry's volume. "Remove your hand, Potter," he growled, "or I will remove it for you."

Harry's voice remained steady, though his face was taut. "I knew one thing before I came here today," he said. "And now I'm sure about another one." He held Snape's arm for a moment longer, and then he released it and stepped back. Snape did not move. "Go, then," Harry said at last. "Or stay and find out one thing new."

Snape stared at him, and Harry refused to look away. Snape blinked. This was not the little boy he had protected through his reckless adventures, the child he had detested with a passion, the youth who had continually and forcefully reminded him of his hated rival. This was also not someone who loathed him. Not anymore. He saw respect in those impossibly green eyes.

And he saw a challenge.

"One thing?" he asked at last.

Harry nodded very slightly. "One very good thing," he acknowledged. "Are you as brave as I've been saying you are?"

"Harry?" came a hesitant voice from behind Snape.

Snape's eyes flickered almost infinitesimally, and he saw that Harry had seen the effect her voice had on him. Still staring into Snape's midnight black eyes, Harry replied, "Yes, Hermione?"

"Your wife says . . ." she began. Then, her voice firmer, she said, "I'm going to want a word with you later."

"Certainly," he answered. "Right now, I have to make a toast. Excuse me, sir." He bowed very slightly to Snape and withdrew.

Snape stilled his breathing and composed his features into a protective sneer. Then he turned to look into the puzzled face of Hermione Granger.

"Harry," she said finally.

"Has just left," he replied, trying to sound bored. "A toast, I believe he said. To the happy couple, one would presume."

She waved a hand dismissively. "He sent it. He invited you."

"Did he." It was not a question.

"But you didn't know that," she continued, her head cocked to one side and a quizzical look on her face. "You thought I had made sure you were invited. You came because you thought I wanted you here."

He snorted. "Miss Granger, I assure you--"

"No," she interrupted. "I did want you here. Although how Harry knew that, I don't quite understand. I mean, he's been helping us in the lab for months now, but I haven't talked to him. Not about" She stopped speaking and simply looked at him.

Snape opened his mouth and then closed it again. Harry's challenge rang in his ears. He took a deep, steadying breath. And then he said, "One very good thing."

Her brow furrowed. She was clearly trying to puzzle out this piece of apparent nonsense. "How much have you had to drink?" she asked slowly.

"Not enough," he replied solemnly. "Not nearly enough."

"Would you like me to--" she began.

"Miss Granger," he stopped her, "may I have this dance?"

He almost laughed at the astonishment on her face. "D-dance?" she stuttered.

"Stylized movement, coordinated to music, part of the social ritual of interplay between the sexes," he intoned. "A standard component of the Hogwarts curriculum for all students. Yourself. Myself."

He extended his hand, and she stared at it as though she had never seen such an appendage before. Then her own hand raised up slowly, almost of its own accord, and touched down lightly on his open palm. He lowered his thumb to brush against her knuckles, and her thumb came up to rest on his fingers. Their eyes locked.

With the slightest pressure on the hand resting in his, he led her out onto the dance floor. His other hand settled at her waist, and hers floated to his shoulder. The years of lessons they had both been required to endure took over. Neither was a natural dancer, but both had been obsessive students, and the music demanded only a simple waltz. And for the first time in either of their lives, neither Severus nor Hermione worried about counting beats, following imaginary patterns on the floor, or inadvertently crushing anyone's feet, including their own.

They simply danced.

"One very good thing," he repeated, when he could finally remember how to speak again.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Harry Potter," he answered. "He promised that I would learn one very good thing today. That is the reason I came."

"No," she corrected him softly. "That is the reason you stayed."

The corner of his mouth quirked very slightly. "I stand corrected," he agreed. "It is indeed."

"And . . . did you?" she asked, and now he heard the tiny uncertainty in her voice. "Did you learn one very good thing today?"

The hand at her waist slid around her back and urged her closer. She melted willingly.

"Yes, Miss Granger," he breathed, his lips just at her ear. "I did. Though I confess I am hard pressed to believe it."

She placed her head very gently against the line of buttons on the front of his frock coat and tucked the hand that had rested on his shoulder into his protective embrace. "Is it so difficult to accept?" she asked quietly, her voice slightly muffled.

He drew back in order to look into her eyes. "It is astonishing," he admitted. "It is unthinkable. It . . . requires a kind of courage I do not deserve or know." He lowered his eyes, which had suddenly become too bright.

Her hand flew to his cheek in a comforting caress. "Never!" she hissed fiercely, and his eyes snapped up to meet hers again at the force of the word. They stood, staring into each other's eyes, arms entangled.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, kiss her already!" Harry called, as he and Ginny waltzed past them.

Snape blinked twice, his bearings lost, while Hermione turned pink in his arms. Snape cleared his throat and arched one eyebrow at the whirling couple. "Propriety, Mr. Potter," he said rather loudly. "I would not expect you to understand, though you have had innumerable lessons."

He gazed down at the woman in his arms, his cloak of dignity back in place. "You are looking quite flushed, Miss Granger," he told her coolly. "Perhaps a breath of air?"

She was not as skilled at hiding her amusement completely, but she did try. "Thank you, Professor," she replied, with nearly equal detachment. "I would appreciate it."

Still holding one of her hands, he led her toward the door he had originally seen as his escape route. It opened onto a small veranda and a view of the last rays of what appeared to have been a magnificent sunset. Neither saw it.

Snape closed the doors behind them with a flick of his hand. "Mr. Potter said he knew one thing before he came here today. What was that?"

She gasped, but shook her head. "I have no idea," she breathed. "I didn't tell him anything. I . . . hadn't realized there was anything to tell."

He studied her face. "Neither had I," he said at last. "I wonder which thing he already knew, and which he learned today?"

As she moved into his embrace, she asked only, "Does it matter?"

Inside, wife smiled up at husband as they continued their waltz. "You are a clever man, Harry Potter," she observed.

"Yes, I am," he replied, looking quite smug. "But really, how were we supposed to get any work done? And besides," he added as he maneuvered her around a pair of lumbering Ravenclaws, "it isn't as though it wasn't perfectly obvious."

"Obvious to you, perhaps," she answered serenely. "Sometimes both of them are just too smart for their own good. Makes 'em blind."

"Yes, well, thanks for slipping me an extra wedding invitation," Harry said. "It was the only way I could think of to get them together outside the lab."

Ginny looked speculatively at her husband. "You already knew how she felt. And you already suspected he was nuts about her. What was it you found out just today?"

Harry smiled down at his bride and kissed her nose. "Nothing new, really," he admitted. "Just that Albus was right. About love. It really is one very good thing." He twirled her around in order to kiss her properly. A husband did have certain rights, after all. Even in the middle of a dance floor.