

Ladder

by ubiquirk

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit. Multiple award winner.

1: Rung One - Her

Chapter 1 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit. Multiple award winner.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

This story has won multiple awards (thanks everyone!). They can be seen on this page: <http://ubiquirk.livejournal.com/124883.html>

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

Thanks go as well to sshg316, who made the lovely banner!



1: Rung One – Her

June 30th, 3:05 pm

I give a rather indelicate grunt and attempt to push another box of miscellaneous bric-a-brac out of my way. When Tonks told me the decorations were just at the top of the ladder, I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Organization isn't her strong suit.

In fact, the attic of her trendy Camden flat is so full of unmarked boxes that I can't even get into it or find the light – you'd think I'd be used to all things Muggle.

But, no – here I am stuck partway up the ladder, wandless, with my hips just cresting the attic floor, unwilling to go further and less willing to admit defeat. I may have kicked off my shoes and put my hair up to get it out of the way, but I'm beginning to realize that my red party dress – or should I say Tonks's party dress, which she insisted I wear as mine was deemed too boring – is quickly becoming inappropriate for the job.

Just as I lift my right foot to move down the ladder, a hand slides up my left calf. I jump.

"No, no – stay there," a silky voice murmurs. "I have thought of you all day, and this position offers a delightful amount of access."

I freeze – his voice!

Since when has Ron sounded so husky, so deep? And what is he doing here?

He and Ginny were going to host an informal game of Quidditch at the Burrow this afternoon, leaving me free to help Tonks get the Order's 2nd Annual Victory Celebration ready.

The hand drifts up my inner thigh, teasingly stroking the skin, and a hot mouth begins to lave the inside of one ankle. The ladder creaks as he mounts a step, and the mouth moves up to the back of my knee – I gasp. The intense tingling sensation centered on my clitoris is already so strong that I begin to tremble lightly.

It is our first anniversary – maybe he arranged with Tonks that she would run an errand around three. If he wanted to surprise me, he couldn't have done a better job of it.

Especially since he rarely goes down on me.

Another creak and he's burrowed his head under the skirt of the dress while running a finger along the edge of my underwear. I'm amazingly wet, and realize he'll feel as much as his hand moves closer to my core.

His nose brushes against the silk crotch of my knickers, and there's a murmur I don't catch. My underwear disappears.

When did Ron learn that?

Coherent thought stops as his mouth begins placing teasing little kisses on my clit. I spread my legs and lean forward onto a box so that my arms can take the weight my weakening knees suddenly refuse to support.

The teasing continues: light little flicks of tongue on clit coupled with a pressure that dances around my opening without really penetrating. It's utterly delicious – every nerve ending sings in delight, sensitized by the fleeting touches.

He pauses to pull in an audible breath of my scent, and the thought that he enjoys my smell sparks something primal within me – I gasp, panting for breath and coating his face with my wetness.

He chuckles, a dark shiver against my eardrums that echoes lower when his lips quiver against my nub, and begins working me in earnest. A single finger slips halfway into me and crooks forward to rub repeatedly at the highly textured bundle of nerves comprising my G-spot; his tongue begins a relentless caress of my clitoris, timed to match the motion of his finger.

Circe, when did he learn this?

I spiral upwards, ever closer to climax, and he backs off slightly. His finger stills its in-and-out movement and rests pressing on my G-spot while his tongue returns to lighter licks. Squirming, I mewl a protest as my impending orgasm recedes slightly, but he is relentlessly gentle, and any movements on my part to sit more fully on his face meet with subtle withdrawals.

Then he increases intensity again, tongue and finger quivering over aching flesh, and I feel as if I can barely breathe as the delicious warmth once again begins to radiate from my core. I clamp my muscles around his finger, driving it further into my G-spot, and hold it there while my hips undulate in little waves over his tongue.

As soon as my walls shudder in a little pre-spasm, he backs off once again. This time I groan my disappointment, and if he weren't doing such a good job, I'd be angry about his answering chuckle.

He runs his tongue up and down my slit, pausing to lap excitedly at my entrance as if starved of my taste. I love his enthusiasm, and the wet sounds of his mouth moving against my flesh stoke my arousal higher, but it's not *enough*.

After what feels like ages of this torture, his finger and tongue return to their more intense stroking of both bundles of nerves: tongue sliding in concentrated circles, never

losing contact with my nub, finger repeatedly sliding over my G-spot until a growing warmth emanates to join the one radiating from my clitoris. My legs are trembling noticeably now, and I can feel that my wetness slicks his face whenever it touches my thighs.

His tongue blurs across me.

Oh, oh, oh, shite

A blossoming vibration coils outwards from my center to leave my fingers and toes tingling; my mouth gapes open, head arched backwards on corded neck, frozen in silent exaltation; my cunt spasms frantically as my entire core burns from a blaze of sensation; and the darkness of the attic grows even blacker around me as I almost pass out, hearing fading, my consciousness focused on nothing but this one overwhelming feeling.

My legs buckle, but he's out from under my skirt and standing just below me on the ladder, and my body falls back against his. Arms circle and hold me upright while his height allows him to nuzzle my neck. I can feel his erection pressing against the back of my left thigh, but I'm too dazed to do much more than wiggle against it a bit.

"There now," a velvety voice murmurs in my ear, "you should feel a bit more relaxed about throwing your first party after that."

I freeze again. Two thoughts hit me simultaneously: I'm not throwing the party, and that's not Ron!

Oh, goddess!

My brain rapidly sorts information I'd noticed but failed to collate: unusual spell prowess, exceptionally deep voice, large nose, talented hands and tongue – Snape!

The most intense orgasm of my life, and it was not only *not* my boyfriend, but Tonks's – and it was Snape!

Thoughts scramble like terrified small creatures as I search for something to say.

I'm saved, if you can call it that, by a door slam.

"I'm back," Tonks's voice calls out, followed by the sound of dropped shopping.

The body behind me tenses.

"I forgot to mention, Mione," she continues, "Severus might drop in early to help, though he'll complain about it if he does."

Quickly, he descends the remaining rungs to the floor, and there's a quiet pop.

I move halfway down the ladder in order to look around the room – no sign of him.

Entering with her head down, Tonks picks distractedly at over-packaged wineglass decorations from Odd Bins. She looks up at me. "Has he been by?"

"No." I sound a little too breathless and clear my throat. "I haven't seen him."

And it's true – I never saw him.

AN: If you're wondering why Severus doesn't realize it's not Tonks earlier, I beg patience. There will be hints as to why in Chapter 2 and a more thorough explanation in Chapter 4.

2: Rung One - Him

Chapter 2 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

More thanks go to alienor77310 for painting this incredible piece of art for the story! It's wonderful - the colors, the shading, the composition. She's titled it 'Don't Move,' and it's just lovely. Thank you so much, alienor 77310!



2: Rung One – Him

June 30th, 3:05 pm

Being in a relationship – even one merely existing at the level of ‘fuck buddies,’ as Tonks so delightfully puts it – takes more work and consideration than I am accustomed to.

I, therefore, attempt to aid her in throwing the Order’s 2nd Annual Victory Celebration. My arguments that she allow Molly to once again throw the celebration at the Burrow have fallen on deaf ears. Fleur’s pregnancy and George’s wedding appear to be time consuming affairs. Similarly, my idea that if she is going to take responsibility for said monstrosity, she should consider Grimmauld Place as the venue was ignored. The pain of losing Potter makes his rather gloomy house an even more inappropriate location for the event even if the Order continues to use it as headquarters.

Since my brain seems to be unappreciated, I choose to don the role of supportive paramour for the evening and aid her preparations in a physical manner. Apparating to her flat, I decide I will surprise her – she has repeatedly said she wants me to be more playful, and it is our so-called ‘anniversary.’

I find her trying to enter her attic; although, if it is anything like her cupboards, it is a hopeless endeavor.

Tonks wears the red dress she showed me last week – one of five she was considering for the event. A pity – I was, of course, partial to the green.

Nonetheless, I can see up this one as well as the other and quickly recognize the potential of the ladder. I slide a hand up her left calf. She jumps a little and tenses to move.

“No, no – stay there,” I say quietly. “I have thought of you all day, and this position offers a delightful amount of access.”

As my hand drifts further up her leg, I begin to kiss my way to her core – hot, open-mouthed kisses that allow my tongue to swirl. Her skin is soft underneath my flesh, and she smells somehow different, as if she has used a new scent of shower gel; it is light and clean and strangely arousing. The ladder creaks with each step I take and almost drowns out the sound of her soft gasps.

Interesting – usually she is more vocal, almost annoyingly so.

My cock stirs to awareness.

As I duck my head under her dress, I smirk at the rather demure underwear she sports this evening. My typically g-string clad darling models hipster shorts of soft, red silk that cup her bottom enticingly. I am almost sad to make them disappear, but I will buy her more. Envisioning exactly what I want whisked away, I murmur, “*Evanesco*” – a personal variation of wandless magic I perfected years ago.

And to what benefit! Her center is spread bare before me, and I cannot resist kissing her clitoris repeatedly and ever so lightly. As her legs spread, I begin to lick instead while burying my nose in her entrance. Pausing momentarily to breathe in her scent, I revel in her reaction.

Never has she been so wet or smelled so divine.

She has also rather demurely crafted hair of a normal brown – a first, and hopefully done to please me, as I once mentioned my preference for a more natural look than chartreuse.

A small laugh of delight escapes me, and I reward her by inserting my middle finger into her and angling it until I can feel the nubbily textured area of her G-spot. I stroke in and out of her repeatedly, always catching this bundle of nerves, and my tongue lashes more firmly at her clitoris in exact time with my finger. Her gasps and pants are wonderful to hear, and my erection pulses in time with her exhalations, rubbing against the fabric of my boxers.

As she nears her crescendo, I reduce my attentions to her complaint – she is always a bit impatient. Holding my finger still on her G-spot and only licking her clitoris lightly, I take a few minutes to stroke myself through my clothing with my other hand. The mewl she gives when I will not allow her to force herself down onto my face is exquisite.

Merlin, I am harder than ever. Perhaps there is something to this spontaneity thing after all.

I begin to lick and stroke her strongly again and am rewarded by feeling her muscles clench my finger as she begins to move above me.

Damn, since when is she this tight? Perhaps it is a special indulgence she has created with this body.

It is not long before she once again reaches her edge, and I choose to hold her from completion one further time. Her groaned complaint causes me to laugh – as if she has not learned by now that such patience will be amply rewarded. Besides, this gives me the opportunity to lick her repeatedly from front to back, lapping at her nectar greedily as I pass its fount.

Even her taste differs in this form – somehow sweeter, more intoxicating.

I catch myself unconsciously grinding against a rung of the ladder and desist before I finish in my pants like an uncontrolled teenager.

Having held her at this plateau long enough that her next climb will be to a higher peak, I begin to move my finger and tongue more intensely again – over and over stroking her clitoris and G-spot with a relentless rhythm. Her wetness grows impossibly greater, her breath comes fast and shallow, and her legs begin to shake, followed

by the walls of her vagina. Her body freezes at the pinnacle of a long spasm that leaves her arched, not even breathing. I ride it out with her, never decreasing the pressure on either nerve bundle until she sags above me.

Quickly, I climb the ladder until my body supports hers. As I nuzzle her neck and hold her close, I am reminded of my erection. Her weak-kneed movement against me is enough to consider moving this to the bed after all – party be damned.

"There now," I soothe against her ear, "you should feel a bit more relaxed about throwing your first party after that."

She tenses. Reminding her of the party may have been a poor decision on my part. She remains quiet. I wish the attic were not so dark so that I could see her facial expression.

I am just about to speak again, to reassure her of my aid, when the front door closes loudly.

"I'm back," Tonks calls, her salutation echoed by the little plunks packages make impacting the front hall's wood floor.

My muscles go rigid.

If that is Tonks, then ... ?

"I forgot to mention, Mione," she continues, "Severus might drop in early to help, though he'll complain about it if he does."

Granger.

Although exclusivity plays no part in my relationship with Tonks, even I have to admit the gaucheness of performing cunnilingus on another woman in her flat. Cunnilingus on Granger.

And she loved it and I loved it.

I move down the ladder as quickly as I can and Disapparate.

My stumble upon appearing in the Leaky Cauldron causes Tom to look at me quizzically. "Moving from a spot of danger, were you?"

"Something like that," I say.

Danger indeed.

3: Rung Two - Her

Chapter 3 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

3: Rung Two – Her

June 30th, 7:35 pm

I stand in a dark corner of Tonks's temporarily enlarged sitting room and look across a mass of drinking, laughing, talking, dancing humanity, unable to join in. I can't believe it's only a half hour in – the party will last for at least five more hours. I claim a headache if anyone asks, and such a response caused Ron to ricochet back to his brothers about ten minutes ago.

Actually, my body feels fine – wonderful even.

And why is that, hmm?

I sigh. It's my mind that needs a break. Which of course means it's in overdrive. Maybe if I think of something other than Snape, I'll be able to enjoy the party.

Who am I fooling – the Victory Celebration is excruciating this year. It was last year as well, but for a different reason. Then, I'd found it almost impossible to feel like celebrating because, even though we'd brought down Voldemort, we'd lost too many loved ones in the process. A year hadn't been enough to dull the grief of losing them all: Cedric, Sirius, and Albus early on; then Luna, Justin, Seamus, Padma, Hannah, Neville, Fred, Charlie, Remus, Professor Spout, Professor Flitwick, and Professor Vector during the Final Battle; and, finally, Harry – Harry, who knew he was Voldemort's last Horcrux and killed himself right after finishing off You-Know-Who. Harry, who'd never really gotten to live.

This year, instead of sadness, the mood of the Order is a feeling of quiet desperation. If so many of our friends died so that we could live in a better world, well then, we'd better get on with being happy. And not just happy – deliriously happy.

In the middle of the room are the Weasleys, who are pouring all of their substantial emotional energy into Fleur and Bill's impending child and George's marriage to Parvati. THE FIRST GRANDCHILD – and yes, this is always said in such a way as to denote an occurrence so important as to be in all caps – will be smothered within the first minute of life if Molly clasps it to her bosom with the death grip she uses every time she hugs me. Although George and Parvati have a natural connection as surviving twins, their courtship has a feeling of desperation to it. The sheen of their smiles is only outdone by the manic gleam of their eyes as they move together on the dance floor.

The lunacy extends to the other children. Ginny, crushed by Harry's sacrifice, has only recently begun to date a similarly subdued Colin, yet Molly is already hinting about the beauty of spring weddings. Even now, I can see her pushing them onto the dance floor. Ginny's back is stiff, and Colin stares at his shoes.

For Ron and me, who only got together a year ago, she has brought out her full arsenal: Ron had to help George select an engagement ring so he'd know what to do when the time came, and when my bridesmaid dress was made, Molly had Madam Malkin keep my measurements on file, saying they'd be needed soon for a white dress of my own. She even bought me a subscription to *Witchy Weddings* and expects me to bring each issue to lunch as soon as it arrives to discuss dress styles, flower preferences, etc. Arthur takes Ron to view houses the Ministry has recently repossessed for back taxes in order to find a good deal since Ron's Auror salary isn't very substantial and I'm just out of school.

I look over at Ron and see him making wild gestures that describe one of the amazing plays he'd made today. Ron, who really wanted to play Quidditch but went into Auror training because that was Harry's dream. Ginny did the same. They speak of job satisfaction with big, bright smiles but never look as joyous as he is right now.

This desperation extends past the Weasley clan. Minerva has Alastor cornered, trying once again to defend her non-sexist language campaign to the old codger. Kingsley spins Tonks across the dance floor so quickly her red and purple striped hair appears to strobe – his face intense. Ernie and Dean are already pissed; laughing overly loudly, they attempt to help each other stand, but aren't very successful. George must have spiked the punch in a determined effort to show he's just as wild as ever, even without Fred. Mundungus finishes a dirty joke, and Hagrid's laugh fills the room, yet sounds strained and hollow.

And me – how does this mood extend to me? Fortunately, what I have always wanted to do corresponds to what others expect of me and what I expect of myself. I am an academic. After Portkeying to Beauxbatons five days a week for the past two years to apprentice with Master Javier Santiago, I have obtained the rank of Arithmancy Master and will return to Hogwarts in autumn as a professor.

No, my sense of desperation comes from a completely different source – my relationship with Ron. Until today, I thought my reluctance to commit to him was due to Molly's pushing – a desire to maintain a feeling of autonomy. Now I realize that everything Ron and I have together is comfortable: simple conversations, nice cuddling, okay sex.

And what do those add up to? Only one thing: boring.

I might not have known that sex could be something other than okay until this afternoon, but I've always recognized that simple conversations weren't enough. I'd been able to satisfy my intellect by discussing various areas of magical theory with Professor Santiago, but that ended last week. What will I do when most of the people I interact with are teenagers?

What about Snape? He's brilliant, and Minerva's determined to have him return.

I'm not going to think about Snape.

Or sex. Or mind-blowing orgasms.

Nope, not at all.

Until he ruins my resolve by entering the room.

4: Rung Two - Him

Chapter 4 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

4: Rung Two – Him

June 30th, 7:35 pm

The Leaky Cauldron is quiet. Most people spend Victory Day at home with friends and loved ones. Which means it is the perfect time to find Dumbledore's pet Death Eater drinking alone in a pub.

Bitter, very bitter, old man.

All three of the other patrons stare when they think I am not looking and turn quickly away when they realize I am.

The Ogden's is strong, but I cannot indulge in enough of it to make a difference at this point – Tonks's party began on the hour, and even though I could back out of helping, I definitely stated I would be there for the event.

Although I did help – only I 'helped' the wrong woman. Or the right woman – after all, she orgasmed so fiercely that she must have needed it. Perhaps Weasley fails to keep his end up.

I toss back the rest of my drink, but it will do little to keep the dark voice at bay. I snort. 'The dark voice' – as if it were someone other than myself.

As if I were not the man who killed his best friend. Even though the ruddy bastard was correct, and it was a necessary step along the treacherous road to victory, the fact remains that I killed my best friend.

One year ago, I was still sitting in a Ministry cell, awaiting the completion of my trial, which had been temporarily suspended for the first Victory Day Celebration. The Ministry held a ceremony, the Order threw its party, and I had my first unofficial visit from Auror Tonks.

She had been the investigating Auror on my case, and this meant she had done most of the work uncovering evidence about my activities as both a Death Eater and a member of the Order. Since the case was winding down, and Albus's Pensieve clearing me of responsibility had been viewed, Tonks once more saw me as a comrade in arms.

She came bearing dinner and must have asked Minerva about my food preferences because she had a Shepherd's Pie and a four-pack of Boddingtons. How she ever learned the Muggle bitter I had grown fond of while on the run, I will never know.

I ate most of the pie, but she matched me drink for drink on the Boddingtons, and after finishing, we were both pleasantly inebriated. When she slid to my end of the bed and straddled my lap, I did nothing to protest and returned her kiss with enthusiasm. A Slytherin knows how to accept gifts from Gryffindors, who rarely attach strings.

Thus began one of the strangest relationships of my life. The sex is good – primarily because of her enthusiasm and the fact that she constantly metamorphs her body into various shapes and colorations. In fact, it is more accurate to describe our encounters as a series of one-night stands. This was thrilling at first, and especially so since I had had so little time for carnal pleasures once Voldemort returned.

Yet, while some men would look upon my situation as a gift of the gods, it has begun to pale. There is no intellectual or emotional connection. Tonks may like me, but it is the like one feels for a fond acquaintance.

Or a pet.

Is that all I am to her? The partially tame Death Eater who is an exciting fuck? She always did like a little monster in her man – Lupin being a case in point.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. If that is the situation, then it is not conscious on her part. She is not a malicious person. To her, we are simply having fun, and it is enough for now.

But for me? What do I want anymore?

A Gryffindor who comes so hard that her deliciously wet cunny will squeeze my cock until it ...

Enough! A fuck will not solve my problems.

First off, I need employment. My teacher's salary never kept me anything but solvent, and the little I managed to squirrel away is dwindling quickly. Even after my full pardon, no apothecary seems willing to hire me, Potions Master or not. I have to hope that Minerva will ask me to return to Hogwarts when I see her tonight. She asked after I was pardoned, but I never thought I could stand to see the place where I killed Albus.

Now I will have to.

There have been changes. Who knew Head-Professor McGonagall would campaign so vehemently for non-sexist job titles? Gone is the rank of Mistress – all those completing a certified apprenticeship are Masters, which is the original title of the designation. Gone are the Head Boy and Girl positions – now there are Head Students for each House chosen from the seventh years with an unstated rule that the sexes will be evenly represented. Minerva argues that the inherent prejudice that gave rise to the Death Eater Movement can take many forms – magical ability, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. Gender is the next area to undertake, and, as the leader of the now public Order, she has the desire and the power to do so. Besides, it keeps the hardnosed traditionalists – those who supported Voldemort without becoming Death Eaters – too busy to reorganize their blood-purity pogrom. Rather Slytherin of her actually.

There will also be an almost entirely new faculty. Albus, Filius, Pomona, and Veruca are gone. Sibyll retired since she no longer needed to hide from Voldemort. Minerva no longer teaches.

I hope it will be different enough.

Granger will be there. Having her in my bed and life would make things very different.

I stand quickly, toss a handful of Sickles on the bar, and Disapparate to Tonks's – I am already late.

I have not thought on what I will do when I next see Granger. How very un-Slytherin of me.

My frock coat jockeys for space on a coat rack, and I run a hand through my hair before entering the chaos of the sitting room. Letting out a breath I had not realized I was holding, I feel simultaneously relieved and disappointed when I do not see her in the crowd.

AN: I've picked Veruca as Vector's first name – it uses JKR's penchant for alliteration and doesn't get used much. I also sorted Tonks into Gryffindor.

Anyone recognize where I nicked the phrase "a little monster in her man" from?

5: Rung Three - Her

Chapter 5 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

5: Rung Three – Her

June 30th, 8:05 pm

He doesn't see me, and I'm glad.

I am glad, right?

Making up for my missed chance from earlier, I look at him. It's been a while since I've seen him. I may be friends with Tonks, but she doesn't exactly bring him 'round the

pub. He looks better than he ever did at Hogwarts, but that could be because he no longer wears body-obscuring robes. He's even lost the frock coat for the night, donning a silver and green fronted waistcoat over starched white cotton. I can finally appreciate his lean build.

No – it's more than that. His face appears more relaxed, the lines of care he'd worn so harshly during the war look softer, his eyes and mouth less pinched.

The change extends to his body – the shoulders don't ride so high, his movements appear even more fluid. In fact, when Tonks runs at him to hug him, he catches her and spins her lightly, twirling her laughter throughout the room. He even smiles.

Their physicality makes me uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable or jealous? Am I jealous? And if so, jealous over what? We had a ... an encounter of mistaken identity. That's all.

Ron chooses this moment to grab my wrist and drag me into the room proper.

"Snape," he's calling, and I wonder when he decided they were on such friendly terms. Whatever's in the punch must really be something.

Snape appears puzzled by it as well and decorates his reply with a half sneer. "Mr. Weasley, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

If I weren't so mortified, I'd laugh – he makes pleasure sound like the direst torture.

Why shouldn't he – he's good at combining the two, or have you forgotten already?

I blush fiercely, feeling the heat engulf not only my face, but my neck and décolletage as well.

He turns to me, and the sneer changes to a smirk, a smirk with eyebrow.

Ron continues. "See, it's like this: Hermione has a headache, and it's not only the Victory Celebration tonight, it's also our anniversary. So help a bloke out, will you, and give us a spot of headache potion."

The look on Snape's face turns thoughtful, and even as he answers Ron, he keeps his eyes on me. "Ah, a headache – we all know how infamous those can be." His tone is sardonic, and the eyebrow arches higher.

I blush even hotter, darker.

"I will see what I have." He disengages from Tonks and moves towards a front hall crowded with overflowing coat racks borrowed from Grimmauld Place, the Burrow, and my flat. Their restless shuffles can barely be heard above the noise from the next room.

I only know all of this because Ron continues to pull me by my left arm as he trots after Snape.

Turning abruptly, Snape puts a stop to Ron's forward momentum by raising a hand. "Mr. Weasley, undoubtedly, you have a plethora of family members to attend to. If you would leave Ms. Granger in my hands, I promise I will strive to return her to you shortly pain free."

Ron breaks into a smile and raises an arm to cuff Snape's shoulder, but it waivers without making contact as some part of his brain belatedly realizes that might be taking things a bit too far. "Thanks, Snape. Now that the war's over, you're an alright sort of bloke."

Another eyebrow. "Why, Mr. Weasley, such high praise from you wipes the slate clean of the condemnations of my life."

I fight to stifle my snort of laughter, turning it into a cough.

Pounding my back, Ron smiles again, this time a little unsurely, before turning to kiss my lips gently. "I hope you feel better soon, Mione," he whispers.

I sigh a bit as he walks away – how can he move so quickly from oaf-like to sweet? It's one of his most endearing qualities and one of the first things I loved about him.

Then I turn to face the intensity that is Severus Snape.

I meet the sneer on his face with a glare of my own, and we stand deadlocked like this for what seems ages, but must only be a few minutes.

I have no bloody clue what to say.

He breaks the silence. "Let us discontinue this farce. Unless, that is, Weasley's inane Quidditch babble has truly given you a headache."

"You leave Ron out of this. He's a good man and doesn't deserve such derision."

"A good man, you say?" He moves closer, and his voice drops to a husky whisper. "Just how *good* is he?"

Of all the nerve. As if he were so wonderful.

Oh, but he is – at least at that.

I give myself a mental shake and purposefully respond only to the surface meaning of his words to more fully reject the dampness growing between my thighs. "He's kind. He's caring. He's loyal. He's –"

He interrupts, "You mistake the connotation of my words, Ms. Granger. The, shall we say, double entendre as it were."

I'm gritting my teeth to keep from replying. If there's one thing I've learned in the competitive world of magical graduate studies, it's if you want the ruddy bastard you're fighting to drown himself, you have to give him time to cook up a large enough cauldron.

He takes the bait and steps closer to continue. "I must admit I am curious. During our little bout of mistaken identity this afternoon, you reacted like a woman in dire need of my attentions. If Weasley were as good –"

This time I stop the conversation – with the crack my hand makes connecting with his cheek.

He backs slightly away and stands at his full height. His eyes flash dangerously, but a small smile pulls at his lips. "Touché, Ms. Granger."

Brushing past me, he leaves the front hall, and I stand, waiting to get my breathing under control, trying to organize my chaotic thoughts.

All I feel is the stinging of my hand.

6: Rung Three - Him

Chapter 6 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

6: Rung Three – Him

June 30th, 8:05 pm

I continue to scan the crowd, zeroing in on any flash of red, but all of them fail to be her.

Just as the tenseness of my shoulders relaxes, an exuberant Tonks whirls out of Shackbolt's arms and into mine. I channel the momentum into a circular swirl: the skirt of her red and purple striped dress flares outwards with the movement before subsiding to rest against her legs as she comes to rest against my chest.

She laughs, her eyes shining with mischief. It is undoubtedly the most emotion she has ever displayed in my presence. The party must be going well.

Tonks's body is tall and exceedingly thin; the cheekbones are prominent, the eyes almond shaped. Her hair matches her dress, as do her eyebrows and, I have little doubt, her pubic pelt.

How very ... garish.

"There you are. I was beginning to miss my favorite snake."

I smirk. "If that is all you miss of me, then I am sure I can Transfigure an exact replica of that portion of my anatomy. I could even charm it to mimic my typical movements."

She laughs again. "Oh, Sev, you tease. You know it's absolutely hours until I can get you alone. I am hosting this party, as you could have remembered this afternoon."

Sev? She knows I detest such monikers.

How to explain this afternoon

My prevarication is forestalled by a vaguely familiar voice shouting my name. I turn to find Ronald Weasley advancing upon me while dragging Ms. Granger rather unceremoniously.

With her hair in a sophisticated up-do and Tonks's revealing red Muggle dress on, she is more attractive than I remember her being.

Or is it what is under the dress that is now so attractive? Speaking of which, I wonder if she conjured new undergarments.

I fight to settle the burgeoning of my cock.

Or is she waiting for Weasley to run his hand up her thigh and –

My face twists into a sneer I fight to quell. "Mr. Weasley, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

My eyes escape my control, and I am drawn to look at her. She blushes almost brightly enough to match her gown, and I find myself amused.

Her poor choice of paramour continues. "See, it's like this: Hermione has a headache, and it's not only the Victory Celebration tonight, it's also our anniversary. So help a bloke out, will you, and give us a spot of headache potion."

A headache. My amusement increases, but I successfully school my features into what I hope is neutrality – all the better to deliver the blow. "Ah, a headache – we all know how infamous those can be."

Her blush now matches the coloration of her gown, but the young pup latched onto her side remains oblivious to my meaning.

"I will see what I have," I conclude and step away from Tonks to retrieve the shrunken potion vials I keep in my frock coat.

As I move down the hallway, the sound from the next room should be deafening, but my years as a spy do have their benefits. I can faintly hear two sets of footsteps following me – one a bit heavy and eager, the other lighter and hesitant. The coat racks shuffle nervously, spelled to bring to the front whomever's garment is needed most, and appear unsure as to which of us that is.

This is perfect – I can talk to her. Alone.

I turn to address the ginger-haired menace. "Mr. Weasley, undoubtedly, you have a plethora of family members to attend to. If you would leave Ms. Granger in my hands, I promise I will strive to return her to you shortly pain free."

He smiles, lifts his arm in what he assumes will be a comradely gesture of masculine slapping, and belatedly halts this impulse. "Thanks, Snape. Now that the war's over, you're an alright sort of bloke."

"Why, Mr. Weasley, such high praise from you wipes the slate clean of the condemnations of my life."

I am more successful in refraining from laughing than Granger, but then I have had more practice.

The arm lifted towards me descends upon her back as he attempts to ameliorate her artificial cough. Calming, he kisses her and whispers an endearment before turning away.

How sweet.

My upper lip curls in disgust.

Her sigh matches the wistful look I briefly glimpse when she again faces me. Then she sees my sneer and her features harden.

We spend an interminable amount of time glowering at each other.

Look at the flush of her cheeks, the snap of her eyes – a worthy opponent.

My patience wears. “Let us discontinue this farce. Unless, that is, Weasley’s inane Quidditch babble has truly given you a headache.”

“You leave Ron out of this. He’s a good man and doesn’t deserve such derision.”

“A good man, you say?” I step closer, and a waft of her skin’s scent passes my nose. It is subtle and natural – uniquely her – and branded upon my olfactory senses. My cock twitches to life, and suddenly I lose any noble intentions I may have had for this conversation. “Just how *good* is he?”

“He’s kind. He’s caring. He’s loyal. He’s –”

She is either naive or purposefully misconstruing my meaning, and I grow even more impatient. “You mistake the connotation of my words, Ms. Granger. The, shall we say, double entendre as it were.”

Emboldened by her silence, I move nearer. Her eyes are especially beautiful at this close range. “I must admit I am curious. During our little bout of mistaken identity this afternoon, you reacted like a woman in dire need of my attentions. If Weasley were as good –”

Her hand rises in a flash, and I am hard pressed to determine which impression reaches my senses more quickly: the sound of the report or the sharp sting of my cheek.

A worthy opponent indeed.

“Touché, Ms. Granger.” Nodding slightly to signal her win, I move past her to enter the toilet, which is miraculously available.

In the mirror, my eyes offer no answers.

All I see is her imprint upon my skin.

AN: Thus ends the first act (okay, it's not a play, but the story's structure is influenced by them). If you're curious, I'm going to begin blogging about writing 'Ladder' on my lj. Next up – an interlude chapter, then on to the second act.

7: A Half Step between Rungs Three and Four

Chapter 7 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

7: A Half Step between Rungs Three and Four

July 30th, 7:05 pm

“Mione, you ready yet?” It’s the fifth time he’s asked in as many minutes.

“No, Ron. If I were ready, I’d be out in the bedroom with you and you’d know it. Now shut it and let me finish.”

He grumbles for a bit on the other side of the bathroom door, but I soon hear the sound of the telly.

I know I’m taking a while to get ready, but I want tonight to be special – after all, it’s the last night of our trip to Tintagel, and the last time we’ll be able to get away for a year.

A swipe of lipstick, and I’m done. The Sleekeazy takes some time to work through my hair, but the results are worth it. The thin straps of my light-green summer frock show off the bit of tan I’ve gotten on arms and shoulders – walking along the cliffs this past week has been more sun exposure than I’ve had in years.

I open the door, hoping to make a grand entrance, but Ron’s become transfixed watching the footie and doesn’t look up.

“Ron.”

Nothing.

“Ron, I’m ready.”

“Brill.” He doesn’t turn. “Just give us a sec, will you? Man U is playing, and the lads down the pub all follow them.”

Picking up my book, I sink into an armchair. I’m considering taking it to the pub so I’ll have something to do while Ron plays darts with the locals. One week in a Muggle village and he’s already in.

I wanted him to understand the world I come from, not fit into it better than I do.

I’m being petty. Besides, we ran out of things to talk about three days ago. How can I begrudge him a few acquaintances?

I stand. "I'm heading out for a spot of air. Come and find me on the cliffs when you're ready."

"Sure. Sure." He still doesn't turn.

I Apparate to a secluded spot we'd found earlier in the week – it's hidden from view by a rather odd-looking rock formation. A sudden gust of wind blows salt tang, toying with my hair.

So much for looking extra smart tonight.

It's worth it. The ebb and flow of the sea provides an endless, restless backdrop of sound. Walking towards the cliff, I balance between being close enough to the brink to enjoy the vista while avoiding the crumbling edges.

It's all so beautiful.

Untold minutes later, Ron's shout fractures the serenity. "Mione!"

I turn to meet him, and we Apparate back to our room at the B&B. The walk to the pub is silent with him a little ahead in his eagerness.

Maybe the sex will be what's special about tonight.

Right.

I suppress a sigh, but Ron's even further ahead, so he probably wouldn't have heard it anyway.

We've shagged nightly, so why haven't I orgasmed lately?

I wish I knew.

~~~

*July 30th, 8:05 pm*

"Severus ... Severus." A sound so faint I must be imagining it.

"**Severus!**" Or possibly not.

After three final clockwise stirs, I cast a stasis charm on the cauldron holding my latest experiment and mount the stairs to enter my sitting room via the kitchen.

"There you are!" Tonks's disembodied head floats in front of the small gas fire I installed last year. "I've been Flooing you for the past hour. I had to cast *Sonorus* that last time. How long were you planning to stay in your laboratory – until September?"

I can feel the upward pull of my eyebrow and do nothing to suppress its message. "You know this is the week I am attempting some rather delicate alterations to the Wolfsbane Potion."

"But I haven't seen you in absolute ages. It's the weekend, and I want to do something."

"My dear, if you remember correctly, the reason you have not seen me recently has more to do with your occupation than mine."

"You're right. You're right, which is why I told Kingsley I couldn't work a late shift with him this weekend. Please say you'll come over." She pauses for me to capitulate and, when I fail to do so, continues. "I know! I'll pop 'round Sainsbury's and pick up some of that broccoli-stilton soup you love so much and some fresh tortelloni."

I hesitate. The potion can be left at this stage, but I rather wanted to finish it.

Tonks decides to sweeten the offer – literally. "I've still got that lovely Chianti you chose last month, and I could get ice cream for afters."

"The chocolate one ..."

She laughs. "Yes, the chocolate one with the toffee sauce and Flake mixed in – your favorite."

And it is – with a flavor far better than anything Fortescue's has to offer. My stomach growls. I have subsisted on little more than beans on toast and Chinese take-away for the past two weeks.

She laughs again. "So which tortelloni – walnut or tomato?"

"The walnut and gorgonzola."

"Fabulous. I'll see you in an hour? Oh, and smarten up a bit – it's Full Tilt at the Electric Ballroom tonight, and I want to go. Ta."

I sigh. My appetite fades slightly. That monstrosity she refers to as a nightclub strikes me as torture one pays to endure – nothing but smoke, the press of strange bodies, and exceedingly loud music. I will watch her dance, and she will parade me in front of her Muggle friends, who always compliment my ability to 'dress the part' and 'stay in character.' The more sarcastic I am, the more they seem to like it. I have little idea as to what they are nattering on about, the pillocks.

*At least the sex will be appropriately compensatory after such a sacrificial gesture on my part.*

I will, of course, make sure of it.

*AN: Traditionally, B&Bs in England aren't posh – they're even less expensive than hotels.*

*Throughout the 90s, Full Tilt at the Electric Ballroom was goth night – a goth night of such gothiness that anything I've seen in America pales. The people looked like extras from a Sisters of Mercy video and acted exceedingly haughty – they'd love Severus (and he'd hate them). The music was great, and there was lots of atmosphere.*

## 8: Rung Four - Her

Chapter 8 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 8: Rung Four – Her

*August 30th, 7:05 pm*

I affix the final poster with a sticking charm; it and its brethren of famous Arithmantic predictions adorn the walls, their final lines of solution shimmering with magic. I've tried to include both positive examples, such as Sillinger's work foreseeing the end of Grindelwald, and negative, such as Crestlebaum's warning of the rise of Grindelwald. The fight against Voldemort proved we shouldn't coddle children.

Brushing hair off of my face, I stretch my back and look around my redesigned classroom with pride.

It had been a bit plain, but that's to be expected. Once life had returned to quasi-normal after the Final Battle, and Hogwarts had reopened, Bill had taken over the Arithmancy position. He'd decided to remain in England to be near his family in their time of grief, and Minerva had been more than happy to have him. But teaching was never his passion, and Gringotts wants him back badly enough to give him a London posting.

Now the room is arranged into four-desk stations for group work, although with built-in charms that will allow me to separate them easily for testing purposes. I also installed a magical projector so that I can prepare my lecture notes ahead of time – it's faster than magicked chalk and will allow me to move around the classroom instead of barricading myself behind a podium.

I walk towards my desk to gather any paperwork I may want to look at later tonight. I've already prepared my lesson plans for the entire school year for each level – it was both grueling and exhilarating. It's a good thing I kept all of my notes from Professor Vector's classes and that I taught first and second years at Beauxbatons.

With everything finally ready, I can't regret arriving at Hogwarts two weeks early to prepare, even if it meant cutting short summer hols with Ron.

*Very conveniently cut short the time with Ron, that is.*

I sigh – I'm meeting him for dinner at the Three Broomsticks in an hour.

The walk to my rooms in Gryffindor Tower is a blur. The familiar items of my life offer little comfort as I move through the sitting room to the bathroom. Standing under the hot beat of the shower, I'm overwhelmed with the thoughts I've been avoiding.

The awkwardness of Cornwall followed us home. It had been a year since Ron and I had spent that much time together, and that had been during the infatuation stage of the relationship.

*We have nothing in common – admit it.*

The water pounds on my skull as I stand transfixed.

*And stop dawdling about already. Unless being late is the goal.*

I turn off the water, perform a quick Drying charm, and enter the bedroom. Digging through my wardrobe, I discard two possibilities – both too smart for a night down the pub – and choose a simple chocolate-brown dress with cap sleeves and a full, knee-length skirt with robes to match. I keep my makeup light and my hair down.

Another distracted walk has me emerging from the castle's entrance. The lake and grounds are beautiful in the extended evening of late summer, but prove too familiar to be diverting.

The sex felt awkward as well, but this was probably due to the fact that B&Bs don't give you the anonymity necessary for good sex. You know you'll be seeing the owner and the other guests in the morning over kippers and porridge.

*Sure – that's all that was wrong with the sex. How does that explain what's been off since we got back?*

I sigh – it's not that the sex is bad. It's that Ron only likes to move quickly, and sometimes I want something slower, something different.

*Well, there's one man you know of who's willing to practice patience in bed.*

I really don't want to think about Snape.

*What if he likes it slow and teasing? What if he draws it out over and over again until I think I'll go insane if I don't come? What if –*

Shut it! Besides, sex does not a relationship make.

*But it doesn't hurt.*

"Humph."

*And you'll see him tomorrow.*

With the gates in sight, I speed up, hoping to Disapparate away from my traitorous thoughts.

Ron's waiting for me when I pop into existence outside of the Three Broomsticks. "Mione," he engulfs me in a hug, "you look smashing."

"Thanks, Ron. You do, too." He's wearing his nicest Weasley jumper with a pair of smart trousers all topped by a humongous grin.

*He's up to something.*

"I've got a surprise, so close your eyes and I'll Side-Along you." His left arm wraps tighter around me, and I'm glad for it when I stagger a bit upon reaching our destination. I always find Side-Along a bit disorienting.

He continues, "Now, just stand right there for a minute and no peeking."

"Ron –"

"Shhh, Mione. Trust me."

I can hear faint noises around me, but they're overrun by the sound of rustling cloth directly in front of me.

*What is going on?*

"Alright, Mione."

*It's Ron in front of me.*

"You can open your eyes now."

And there he is – on bended knee, holding a ruby-set gold ring up to me.

*Oh, shite.*

I am gobsmacked – utterly gobsmacked.

He's Apparated us right into the middle of the Burrow's sitting room. The furniture's all pushed back, and people line the walls. Straight on are my parents and the core of the Weasley clan: Mum and Dad look pleased and a little overwhelmed, Molly beams at me through a curtain of tears, Arthur looks truly happy for the first time in ages. As I turn my head to the right, I can see Percy, George and Parvati, Bill and Fleur – all smiling and watching. To the left are Colin, Susan, Ernie, Dean, Lavender, Cho, and Lee – Ginny smiles and gives me a little wave while Lavender makes a show of crying beautifully into a lace-edged kerchief. The lads shift uncomfortably but maintain their smiles.

*Goddess – he's invited everyone!*

"Hermione."

I turn back to Ron.

"I love you. Will you marry me?"

A quick glance confirms the expectancy on all of those smiling faces. And then there's Ron looking up at me as if I embody all of his hope, his happiness.

There's really only one answer I feel I can give.

"Yes, Ron. I'll marry you."

*AN: "Ha, ha, ha. Mine is an evil laugh!" – Wash from Firefly*

## 9: Rung Four - Him

*Chapter 9 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 9: Rung Four – Him

*August 30th, 7:05 pm*

I knock on her door, and she opens it with a look of surprise, still clothed in ripped jeans and an overly bright t-shirt such as she favors for work.

"Severus, you're early. I'm not ready yet, so you'll just have to wait." She weaves a deliberate path through the clutter of her front hall into her sitting room.

Tonks is no longer clumsy. She has not been since the Final Battle. It is as if the boisterous part of her that allowed her to be carefree died with Lupin.

"Can I get you a drink?"

At my nod, she crosses to a sideboard to decant whiskey into a glass. Her appearance is new again tonight – somewhat short, but heavily muscled, with dusky skin and curly black hair.

It is as if she no longer wants to be herself, and given her special abilities, she is able to manifest this subconscious longing physically.

Concomitantly, she no longer lets herself experience true emotion. Oh, she laughs and cavorts still, but little of it touches her heart. Having done the same for years, I am more than able to detect such a façade. I believe this is actually why she is involved with me – she knows she will never love me, nor I her, and I, therefore, offer no challenge to her emotional isolation.

Shacklebolt, however, seems more than willing to raze her castle walls – and in more ways than one. I suppose my stepping aside will allow him the opening.

*How chivalrous. As if this will not also free me for other pursuits as well.*

She turns, hands me my drink, and moves to exit the room.

“Tonks.”

Stopping, she faces me.

“I would like to speak with you.”

“This can’t be good.” Her grin is wry as she settles next to me on the settee.

I set my drink aside and turn just enough to observe her with my peripheral vision. “Tonks, term at Hogwarts begins in two days, and my time will thus be even more limited than it is now. In fact, it will indubitably be quite a while before I have the ability to pursue recreational activities.”

I pause; she looks away.

*Is there ever a benefit to dawdling? Do it.*

“I feel unable to continue a relationship.”

Staring at the floor, she remains silent. Time slows to a hideous crawl.

*Well, at least she has foregone crying.*

Yet more silence. I shift position in order to face her more fully.

“Tonks?”

A twitch – her head rises abruptly, and the large smile is completely unexpected, as is her reply: “So, how about one more go for old-time’s sake?”

Now it is my turn to remain silent although I raise an eyebrow.

In a move reminiscent of our first time, she takes this as invitation and straddles my lap. “Come on, Severus. I can be anyone you want. Pick a body – a favorite.”

“There is one ...”

“Yes, go on.” She wraps her arms around my neck.

“The issue is that it is not one you have ever worn for me.”

“Not a problem. Not a problem. Just describe it and I can be it.”

“Nymphadora,” I say, looking into her eyes, “I would like for you to be yourself.”

“Myself?” A flash of confusion crosses her features before she leans back and looks away.

“Yes, yourself. Your own face, your own hair, your own body – yourself.”

“I ... I ...” Her face turns even further from me.

Time passes – a few moments only, but moments stretched and awkward.

I reach out and turn her to face me. Silently, great tears roll down her cheeks.

“Nymphadora.”

“I ... I ...” She metamorphs, and for the first time in well over two years I see her face, her true face: pixyish features framed by medium brown hair with eyes that are haunted. It is less exotic than her creations, less glamorous, less perfect, yet somehow more beautiful because it is real.

“You are lovely,” I tell her firmly.

Collapsing as if released from a great weight, she falls to my chest weeping audibly. She murmurs something repeatedly while brushing her face back and forth over my frock coat. Finally coming to rest, her sobs continue at a less frantic pace, and I can determine what she is saying. It is: “I’m sorry.”

I stroke her back and, when she calms even further, whisper, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“But we were going to ... and now ...”

“That is immaterial.” I use the space of a deep breath to consider my next words carefully.

*Make it good, old man.*

“When I look back on our time together, do you know of what I will think? Do you think it will be only remembrances of energetic sex?”

A hiccough of a laugh and she stirs a little against my chest.

“No. It will be that you were a friend when I needed one.”

After a few heartbeats of time, she pushes back to face me with a countenance that is both sad and open. “Thank you, Severus.”

Holding my eyes for a long moment, she forms a small frown and opens her mouth.

Not wanting to know what insight into my psyche she is about to plumb, I stir underneath her uncomfortably. "Now, I really must be going. I promised Minerva I would be only somewhat surly at tomorrow morning's staff meeting."

"Of course." She slides from my lap, walks me to the door, and kisses my cheek in farewell. The door clicks shut quietly behind me.

*Well, there goes my access to regular, uncomplicated fucking.*

I shake my head and snort in wry amusement.

*Still bitter.*

## 10: Rung Five - Her

*Chapter 10 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 10: Rung Five – Her

*August 31st, 7:55 am*

"Accio briefcase!" I put as much power behind the spell as I can but don't stop moving.

*I'm late, I'm late. It's the first day, and I'm bloody well late!*

I'm running through the halls, hopping as I go because one of my shoes wants to come off, and I don't want to stop to fix it. The stodgier portraits tut-tut and shake disapproving heads as I pass.

Sleeping at Ron's after the engagement party was a bad decision – I should have known. Well, all right, I did know. I just chose not to act on it. I mean, how would it sound for me to say: "Yes, I'll marry you. Got to run!"

I slide to a halt a couple of meters outside of the staff room door and attempt to compose myself. A quick *Scourgify* and the sheen of perspiration disappears; a swipe of hand over hair – well, there's only so much I can do with no time.

Fluttering sounds to my left, and I turn in time to catch the briefcase with my torso, but it nonetheless knocks me back half a step, and my loose shoe causes me to stumble slightly.

Taking another swipe at my hair, I square my shoulders and enter the room. Minerva continues to speak but gives me an indulgent nod. I exhale in relief.

It seems every chair is taken by witches and wizards, who are all watching me.

*Impressive first impression, Granger.*

My momentum carries me forward, and it takes a few seconds for me to notice that there is one seat available at the end of the table.

A seat beside Snape.

I sit and ignore him while rummaging in my briefcase for a piece of parchment and a quill.

"And we are most excited to be welcoming so many new faces to the teaching staff this year. Next, I would like to introduce Resaldo Giomanti." Minerva seems to still be in the opening part of her speech, and perhaps because I read the full dossier on each staff member a week ago, my attention wanders.

Trying to sit beside him calmly, professionally, I notice his scent for the first time. No, that's not true. I detected it two months ago in Tonks's foyer but was too angry at the time to process the input. Now I have the enforced leisure of an entire staff meeting to do so.

Smoky. Less offensive than patchouli and darker than sandalwood. There aren't many base-note essential oils left.

*Hmm. What could it be?*

Then, it comes to me. Vetiver – he smells of a complex combination of vetiver and his skin.

*It's perfect.*

Reining in my thoughts, I find my eyes watching his hands as he prepares his tea. I don't realize how intently I've been staring until he wraps his fingers around the cup to raise it to his mouth; following his motion, my gaze meets his. Jerking my eyes back to the parchment in front of me, I squirm slightly, trying to relieve the faint tingling of my center.

I look over at him and find him still watching me intently.

*Circe, it's as if he knows what I'm thinking. There goes the eyebrow.*

Flushing, I squirm again, and this time our knees brush – I'm rewarded with the mild discomfort of tickling wetness seeping across my labia.

He positively smirks.

*Smug bastard.*

Those long fingers reach for an éclair from the platter at our end of the table and raise it to his mouth. His bite is almost dainty it's so precise. He takes a sip of tea.

I relax. He's just eating – why would he do anything else?

The second bite isn't so neat – he twists the pastry while moving it away so that a smear of chocolate covers his bottom lip, and I watch transfixed as he slowly swipes his tongue across it. My clit pulses.

*Ah, bastard, bastard, bastard! Smug bastard with those fingers and that ... that tongue.*

If a rather observant, blond woman weren't sitting directly on my left, I'd be tempted to surreptitiously adjust my knickers, which are now thoroughly soaked and clinging to my folds.

Instead, I raise my right hand to my cheek and feel its warmth – I'm flushed. Looking over, I see Snape smirking widely – it would be a smile if it weren't so predatory. And I swear the man could write an entire eyebrow-code dictionary – he's certainly mastered the vocabulary.

Suddenly, hearing my name captures my attention. "... Granger, who will be our new Arithmancy Master. She is a Hogwarts alumnus and a distinguished war hero." Minerva pauses to positively beam at me. "But on an even happier note, allow me to lead us all in congratulating Professor Granger on her engagement to another of our young war heroes, Ronald Weasley."

That explains why she accepted my tardiness, but how did she know? Of course – Molly must have Flooed her.

I smile and thank my well wishers, going clockwise around the table so that the last person I look at is Snape. His eyebrows say nothing; in fact, his entire face resembles an inflexible mask. Then, a muscle jumps in his clenched jaw, and he grits out, "Congratulations, Professor Granger. Although it is a pity that after having endeavored for so long to obtain this specific appellation that you would relinquish it so quickly."

"Why, Severus," Minerva cuts in, "whoever said she was going to change her last name?"

*AN: It may be evil, but I love Minerva as a hard-core feminist – she never does things by halves!*

*Vetiver is as Hermione describes it – smoky, rich, and deep – but it's difficult to find, as it's not as popular as sandalwood or patchouli.*

## 11: Rung Five - Him

*Chapter 11 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 11: Rung Five – Him

*August 31st, 7:55 am*

I have waited until the very last possible moment to return. If I could have arranged to make it even later, I would have, but there is the staff meeting. It is also inescapable that Slughorn will have left the potions stores in a state of disarray.

The castle taunts me by appearing much as it always has – as if the past three years never occurred and Albus stands waiting to greet me at the entrance as he did so many times before.

This time, there is no one.

Perhaps Minerva is cognizant that a substitute would only exacerbate my mourning for Albus. Perhaps she realizes that different, in this case, is preferable, better.

Walking the stone corridors, I see no one – even the ghosts are absent.

I enter the staff room a few minutes early and am assailed by an enthusiastic Minerva, who captures my arm.

"Severus! Oh, Severus, you don't know what it means to have you back."

I should be gracious. After all, it is her good will that keeps me from a pauper's existence. But the pain runs deep, and walking these halls reminds me of Albus at every turn. "No, Minerva. It is I who am sure you have no idea what it means for me to be back."

Her smile fades and her eyes turn to something beyond this room. "Just so. Just so."

To buffer the effect of my words, I briefly touch her hand where it rests upon my forearm, and her awareness snaps back to the present just as her smile snaps back into place.

Eyes flickering to the doorway behind me, she gives me one last pat before disengaging and turning to greet the newest arrival. "Dorta! You don't know how pleased I am to have someone with your reputation teaching DADA this year. Why Durmstrang ever let such a fine catch go is beyond me."

Her voice fades from my notice as I enter further into the room and note that Granger has not yet arrived. She was either going to be here early to make a bold statement of



fearless indifference, or she was going to avoid me for as long as possible. It appears the latter scenario is the case.

Having planned for both, I react accordingly and move to the far end of the table and lay claim to a seat. I cast a subtle Deterrence Charm on the chair beside me – it is similar to those used to keep Muggles away from magical places. This one, however, is tuned to discourage anyone not Granger.

Colleagues continue to filter into the room with Minerva greeting each individually. Finally, with one last glance towards an empty doorway, Minerva begins the meeting. All chairs are occupied but the magicked one to my left at the end of the table. Perfect.

"I would like to welcome you all to Hogwarts. We're very proud to be opening this term with such a fine lot of teaching staff as I see here before me. Let me begin by introducing ..." Minerva's speech fades into the background – I have heard similar for the last twenty years and could recite one extemporaneously if ever called upon to do so.

I ponder how excessively tardy Granger is proving. Her perfectionism must truly be warring with her desire to avoid me. Excellent. A flustered opponent is one fully caught up in the game.

Eventually, she enters in a rush while Minerva is still seeing to the introductions. Her cheeks are flushed, her breathing quick, her hair rather wild. Her pace barely falters when she sees that the only available seat is beside me, and she settles into it swiftly.

Once she has prepared her writing implements, she worries her lower lip, seemingly lost in thought. A look of realization crosses her face, and her return to awareness leads immediately to her attention affixing upon my hands as I add milk to my tea. I slow my actions, drawing out the slow swirl of the spoon, wrapping my fingers around the cup, threading my middle finger through the handle.

*The finger that was in her.*

Her eyes are rather glazed when they first meet mine, but awareness soon flares, and she looks quickly away and shifts in her seat.

*Interesting – is she excited?*

She looks towards me again. I quirk one eyebrow as both reply and query. Flush intensified, her next restless movements cause her knee to brush mine. My cock hardens.

*Indeed, she is interested.*

My lips twitch, and I do nothing to hide my grin. It is time to intensify matters.

The first bite of éclair is perfectly normal. Her shoulders relax slightly. The second bite is more calculated – I ensure that an adequate amount of chocolate coats my lower lip as I maneuver the confection away from my mouth. Slowly, ever so slowly – seduction never being served by haste – I lap at the sauce and am rewarded by dual delights: its rich taste on my tongue and her reaction. The dilation of her pupils, the quickening of her breath, the flush staining her cheeks.

*She is beautiful when aroused. What would she look like while riding my cock, while spread under me, while climaxing?*

She touches her cheek, and my erection twitches against the soft cotton of my pants. I do nothing to hide my pleasure.

*Perhaps it will not be so long before I have another bed partner.*

Her eyes jerk away, and my attention follows hers to refocus on Minerva. "... will be our new Arithmancy Master. She is a Hogwarts alumna and a distinguished war hero." Minerva pauses to bestow a smile of approval on Granger. "But on an even happier note, allow me to lead us all in congratulating Professor Granger on her engagement to another of our young war heroes, Ronald Weasley."

*Bloody, fucking hell! How could she even conceive of such a thing?*

She busies herself with accepting the congratulations of the other staff members.

My molars ache in protest, but I find myself unable to relax my jaw.

By the time she turns to me, I am able to school my features somewhat. I am not, however, able to keep my tone from displaying trenchant sardonicism. "Congratulations, Professor Granger. Although it is a pity that after having endeavored for so long to obtain this specific appellation that you would relinquish it so quickly."

It is Minerva who answers. "Why, Severus, whoever said she was going to change her last name?"

## 12: Rung Six - Her

*Chapter 12 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

**12: Rung Six – Her**

*August 31st, 8:35 pm*

I'm wandering slowly from the library to my rooms. The look on my face must be solemn because a friar from one of the sillier portraits dumps a tankard of ale over his head and looks at me expectantly. I manage a weak smile, and he turns away in a huff.

*What's wrong with me? I'm newly engaged – aren't I supposed to be happy?*

The friar looks abruptly towards the right side of his frame, and his eyes widen in amazement. He turns to the left and takes two steps before a flood of denizens from other portraits swarms over him.

Similarly, I'm almost bowled over by Nearly Headless Nick. "Coming through. Coming through. No time to chat. Really must run." He tips his head and whips around the corner behind me, leaving a lingering trail of ghostly phosphorescence.

*What's gotten their knickers in such a twist?*

I round the next corner and run into what's upset Nick and the portraits. Or should I say who. It's Snape. No, make that a furious Snape.

As I bounce off of his chest with a little oof, his hands snake out to grab my upper arms in a punishing grip.

The pain is acute but does little to distract me from the overwhelming energy of his presence. The air around him seems to roil in heightened Brownian motion as if his rage literally burns within him.

His expression flickers from anger, through another emotion I can't interpret, and lands on disgust. He pushes me away.

Stumbling until my back hits the wall, I slide my wand into my hand.

*Just in case.*

But whatever I was expecting, it wasn't this – he's turned away from me, saying nothing.

My own anger rises to the surface. "How dare you physically assault me?"

"If I remember correctly, the last time I was physical with you was hardly an interlude that could be referred to as assault."

*Goddess, why does he always make it about sex?*

"I didn't mean the se.... I didn't mean the ladder incident, you git. I meant just now!"

"I apologize, Professor Granger. I had no idea that a mere five seconds of my hands on a fully-clothed, nonsexual area of your person qualified as assault."

"It bloody well hurt, you bastard!"

His back stiffens; the sarcasm leaves his voice. "Then I truly do apologize, Professor Granger."

My anger isn't mollified. "Look at me. Say it while looking at me."

He's still for a moment, and I wonder if he'll comply, when he turns slowly. For the second time that day, I'm struck by how controlled his facial expressions are.

"You want me to speak to you, you want me to look at you, but you will not have me touch you. I find you painfully hypocritical, Professor Granger."

"Hypocritical?" That came out a bit shrill, so I lower my tone. "How dare you say that asking to converse in a civilized fashion without being mauled is hypocritical? It's nothing more than the respectful behavior due a colleague."

"And is that all we are, Professor Granger, colleagues?" He takes a step forward.

"Of course that's all we are," I sputter. "You're with Tonks; I'm with Ron. What more could there be between us?"

"Ms. Tonks and I are no longer a matter of concern."

*Shite. He broke it off with Tonks? Over me?*

"As for you and Weasley," he continues, "that remains to be seen. One could have doubts, as it were, as to the amount of satisfaction you derive from your relationship with him."

"Will you stop bringing up the sodding ladder! It was an accident, a ... a mistake."

"A mistake?" His eyebrow mocks me as he comes even closer.

"Yes, a mistake. And one I don't plan on ever making again."

"Really?" It comes out in the husky whisper I've heard only twice before but which already has a profound effect on me. I shiver.

I try to sound defiant, but my answer is just this side of breathless. "Yes, really."

He leans in, and I feel his hot breath tease my ear. Waiting far longer than is necessary, he eventually murmurs, "I do not believe you."

My auditory nerve endings reroute to my clit, and it tingles in response. Another shiver ripples through me, and liquid tickles across my labia.

He moves ever so slowly, yet inexorably, closer and presses me against the stone wall.

His lips graze my ear lightly, feather under the edge of my jaw, and rise to brush against mine once, twice, a third time. Fire rushes across my skin.

Pulling away slightly, he pauses. I open my eyes to find him looking at me, and having caught my gaze, he leans in again, watching me the whole while. This kiss starts softly and builds intensity slowly. He increases the pressure of his lips and toys with mine for long, delicious moments. I'm not sure I've ever been kissed like this – as if I'm something precious to be savored.

The first swipe of his tongue causes me to gasp, and he chuckles softly against my lips – a dark vibration that once thrummed against my clit. It pulses in sympathetic delight.

His tongue returns, asking for an entrance that I quickly allow, and I send mine out to join his as my eyes drift closed. Our lips continue to move against one another's, and although the kiss has deepened, the touches of our tongues remain light and glancing. Teasing.

After surreptitiously slipping my wand into my pocket, I grab the robes covering his chest and pull him closer to me. My right leg lifts to wrap around his left thigh, which rests against my mound. He places one of his hands under my thigh to hold it higher around him, and his other grabs my left hip. I whimper, sparking an answering groan, and he presses ever closer, his erection hard against my stomach. Sparks of tingling pleasure shoot through my center.

*Circe, I think I could come just from snogging him!*

Hunger defines our kiss now. A hunger for sensation, pleasure, fulfillment. His mouth moves forcefully on mine, and he sucks at my bottom lip, nipping it. My hips rock forward repeatedly to be met by the answering thrust of his thigh, and I slide my tongue into his mouth, attempting to devour his essence. My knickers are soaked.

Trying to slide my hands up so that I can wrap them around his neck, my left hand halts after a few inches. I've caught the ring I'm not yet used to on his robes.

*The ring ...*

*Shite! Ron.*

The icy sickness of guilt washes over me. I struggle to drop my leg and shove him away, angry at him for initiating the kiss and at myself for enjoying it. He looks puzzled, but I'm silent because there's nothing I could say that wouldn't be 'hypocritical.'

He smirks in triumph and moves to lean in.

*I can't do this!*

Pushing him away yet again, I escape down the corridor. I'm running half blind due to the slow response of sconces grown lazy over a studentless summer.

I don't believe me either.

*AN: I may teach English now, but I have a dark secret in my past – I'm also a scientist. Brownian motion – the random motion of molecules when in a gaseous or liquid form; said motion is faster the higher the temperature.*

## 13: Rung Six - Him

*Chapter 13 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 13: Rung Six – Him

*August 31st, 8:35 pm*

I am not quite certain as to what business I have in this particular corridor at this time of day. Its location is nowhere in the vicinity of my rooms or the potions stores I should be cataloging and organizing.

*Please, I should at least do myself the courtesy of truthfulness.*

I have been walking for hours, attempting to defuse an excess of rage-fueled energy.

I am no calmer than before.

Casting hexes as I go, I have succeeded in clearing the hallways of pesky ghosts and the portraits of annoying spectators.

Then, Nearly Headless Nick appears before me.

*Gryffindor.*

I prepare an especially nasty hex, which should raise the equivalent of phantasmal boils of a painful sort, but he darts around a corner.

My steps hasten, but I am halted in my endeavor by a collision with a smaller body. A subtle scent wafts over me that my mind can finally place – petitgrain. It is a scent I also recognize on some primal level.

*Granger.*

I pocket my wand hastily, suddenly anxious to have my hands unencumbered. As she stumbles slightly from the impact, my initial instinct is to steady her, and I grip her biceps. Within the matter of a second, the anger I have wrestled with for most of the day overwhelms me, and my fingers tighten in reflex.

I want to shake her until she leaves that twit, Weasley.

I want to fuck her until I am the only thing she sees, feels, knows.

A wince of pain crosses her features, and I thrust her away in disgust. But it is a disgust directed towards myself, and I turn away from her in an attempt to regain composure.

*How charming. Hurt her as if she were some Death Eater groupie in love with pain and humiliation. She will be sure to fly from Weasley's arms to mine.*

*Idiot.*

Her voice infringes upon my dark reverie. "How dare you physically assault me?"

My response is both automatic and automatically sarcastic. "If I remember correctly, the last time I was physical with you was hardly an interlude that could be referred to

as assault."

"I didn't mean the se.... I didn't mean the ladder incident, you git. I meant just now!"

"I apologize, Professor Granger. I had no idea that a mere five seconds of my hands on a fully-clothed, nonsexual area of your person qualified as assault."

"It bloody well hurt, you bastard!"

My defensive sarcasm abandons me at her confirmation of my concerns. "Then I truly do apologize, Professor Granger."

"Look at me. Say it while looking at me."

I struggle for the control I will need to evince and turn with the appearance of unhurriedness, securing extra moments of such preparation.

As always during our recent encounters, her face is flushed, her breathing quick. My erection stirs.

*Damn, I want this woman.*

While my face manifests composure, my desire nonetheless finds a way to escape through speech. "You want me to speak to you, you want me to look at you, but you will not have me touch you. I find you painfully hypocritical, Professor Granger."

"Hypocritical? How dare you say that asking to converse in a civilized fashion without being mauled is hypocritical? It's nothing more than the respectful behavior due a colleague."

"And is that all we are, Professor Granger, colleagues?" I begin my advance upon her.

"Of course that's all we are. You're with Tonks; I'm with Ron. What more could there be between us?"

*What, indeed?*

"Ms. Tonks and I are no longer a matter of concern." I pause – the most interesting expression just crossed her face, but I find it too transitory to analyze. "As for you and Weasley, that remains to be seen. One could have doubts, as it were, as to the amount of satisfaction you derive from your relationship with him."

"Will you stop bringing up the sodding ladder! It was an accident, a ... a mistake."

"A mistake?" Another step forwards.

"Yes, a mistake. And one I don't plan on ever making again."

I drop my voice in reply. "Really?"

She trembles slightly and answers quietly, all earlier anger missing from her voice. "Yes, really."

Bending towards her, I pause a few moments to partake of her scent before breathing across her ear, "I do not believe you."

The shiver of her body tells me everything I need to know of her desire, and I press forwards into her.

*Slowly. Remember how wet she became from going slowly.*

I allow only the slightest of contacts for my initial assault. Skimming my lips from her ear to her mouth, I taste her briefly thrice. My cock throbs against the confinement of my trousers.

As I pull away, I notice her eyes have closed, and a perverse part of me wants them open. I want there to be no doubt that it is I who kisses her. Once her eyes flutter open, pupils dilated, I arch forward, holding her gaze with mine. As our lips join again, I rein in my rampant desire in order to continue kissing her lightly – a play of friction on blood-rich skin.

Her slight exaltation as I slide my tongue over her causes me to laugh quietly. As before, her responsiveness is delightful. Another swipe, and her mouth opens for me as her tongue begins to dance with mine.

I am careful to keep the pressure teasingly light, and my control lasts up until the point when she fists my robes and hauls me tightly against her body. Her leg rises, and I place my hand under it to wrap it more firmly around me.

*Merlin, how I want her wrapped around me.*

The little whimpering noises that escape her urge me to greater activity, and I find myself moaning and thrusting into her – my thigh at her crux, my erection straining against her stomach.

The pressure and friction against my cock cause me to throw all caution to the wind. I attack her mouth, biting her lower lip and sucking away the sting. She joins the assault and thrusts her tongue firmly across mine. We rock together in a building rhythm that has me close to orgasming as my senses are overwhelmed.

*The smell of her, the sound of her, the feel of her, the taste of her ...*

My climbing spiral is brought crashing to an abrupt halt when she tears her lips from mine, and the hands that had just held me close force me away instead. I quirk an eyebrow, but she says nothing – she simply stands there, panting through kiss-reddened lips with wide eyes locked on mine.

*I suppose I am not the only one who is overwhelmed.*

My lips twitch in a grin, and I move to press them to her once more.

Another shove and she flees down the corridor.

*Fucking hell! What is the cause of such a reaction?*

I stare at the point where she disappeared for untold moments, fists clenched in anger.

Slowly bringing my breathing under control, I attempt to approach the problem rationally. It appears that a change of tactics is in order. I will have to observe her to determine precisely what my new course will be.

Because one thing is certain – I will have her, mistake or no.

*AN: While there are wonderful, hot BDSM stories out there, it doesn't work with the psyches of this Severus and Hermione. It doesn't mean that I, the author, dislike that*

genre.

*Petitgrain is made from the leaves of the bitter orange tree, which also gives us neroli (flowers) and bergamot (fruit peel). It's less floral than neroli, less citrusy than bergamot, and greener smelling than either. Like vetiver, it's unfortunately hard to find.*

*Thus ends the second act – next, an interlude chapter.*

## 14: A Half Step between Rungs Six and Seven

*Chapter 14 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 14: A Half Step between Rungs Six and Seven

*September 30th, 3:05 pm*

I hurry down one of the less traveled corridors that links my classroom and the library, muttering to myself. "First off, grade the third years' essays. Then review the sixth years' lesson plans they're fidgeting more than I'd like must be a bit bored."

Actually, teaching is settling into a comfortable routine far more quickly than I'd expected, although Minerva smiles knowingly anytime I mention it. If I'm honest with myself, it might be me who's becoming bored I'm busy, but I miss the challenge of graduate work, my theoretical discussions with Professor Santiago.

Unexpectedly, a tall figure steps from a shadowed alcove to block my way. I stop abruptly. My wand is in my hand before I even think of it.

"Professor Granger, if you could spare me a few moments of your time, I would appreciate your advice."

*That voice Snape.*

"Why, Professor Snape, you startled me." Especially since I've been avoiding him for the last month and he's gone along with it until now.

"I apologize "

"No, no. It's quite all right. What was it you wished to discuss?"

*Please not sex. Don't talk about sex.*

He makes no move to approach any closer. "As you may well know, I am endeavoring to improve the Wolfsbane Potion. I have run across some difficulty in my attempts to alter the amount of any particular ingredient. I am hoping that Arithmancy may prove useful."

*Goddess, Snape is asking me to work with him on his most important research!*

My trepidation fades as enthusiasm takes over. "I'm sure it will. What have you tried so far?" I pocket my wand, hoping he doesn't see the clandestine movement.

"Shall we retire to the staffroom? If you have time, it may be more appropriate to discuss this with a modicum of comfort."

"Certainly."

He continues as we walk down the hallway side-by-side. "In fact, this project may require ongoing collaboration. With due credit, of course."

"Of course."

"Would you be amenable to weekly meetings at this time?"

*This type of interdisciplinary work could make my reputation!*

Fighting to keep my voice as professional sounding as his, I answer, "I'll put forth every effort to work you into my schedule."

~~~

November 30th, 3:05 pm

She devours the parchment I handed her only a few minutes ago, eyes moving rapidly. Her shoulders are relaxed as she sits directly across from me even though we have relocated our meetings to my office due to the distractions of the staff room.

My patience appears to have produced the desired result.

Each week, our sessions grow in length. As I imagined, once her mind is engaged, she is insatiable.

"No, no, look. The reason this equation never solves for you is that you've left out too many variables." Her eyes snap as she points to a specific section of the long parchment spread in front of us. "Wolfsbane Potion is complex both in terms of the ingredient interactions and the brewing process. We'll have to take every one of those into account."

"But that is preposterous. It would be unwieldy in the extreme unsolvable."

"If we used only one equation, yes. But what I'm proposing is a series of equations one for each step of the process."

Does she have any idea how beautiful she is when she is passionate about something?

"And then?"

"And then, I correlate all of the equations using a variation on Iselda Marchwood's work. She pioneered the simultaneous solution of up to four equations at one time. I may need to increase that number to twenty."

I do not doubt her her mind is brilliant. But I cannot pass by the opportunity to spark a bit more fire in her eyes. My expression neutral, tone slightly bored, I ask, "Do you think you can accomplish such?"

"Of course!" Her cheeks flush.

Beautiful. My plan is working perfectly.

"Tell me."

She leans over the parchment and begins explaining variables.

~~~

*January 30th, 3:05 pm*

"I think it most reasonable at first to maintain the amount of aconite dictated by Damocles Belby. From there, I thought we might alter the amounts of the ginger and hellebore. Or is it even possible to affect two variables at this point?"

"Oh, yes. The system I've developed may not be very sophisticated yet, but we can nonetheless alter three variables at this point."

"Three." A note of amazement enters his voice, and I think this may be the first time I've seen him look pleasantly surprised. "That should prove to accelerate matters significantly."

My cheeks glow with embarrassed pride, and I'm reminded once again of how much I missed our weekly research meetings over Christmas hols.

"I've been thinking." I hesitate, but he spurs me on with his eyebrow. "What if we consider adding some of the other ingredients of Wit-Sharpening Potion? I mean, we try running the equations with larger amounts of ginger first, but perhaps we could also look into adding armadillo bile or scarab beetles."

He's silent, but since he's raised his right hand to repeatedly tap his lips with his index finger, I recognize it as the silence of serious thought.

My eyes focus on lips reddening slightly as the finger's onslaught continues.

*Mmm, remember how he snogs?*

A mental shake, and a quick look at the parchments in front of me, prevents me from going further down that path. Besides, he's made no untoward advances in all of the months we've been working together.

*He must truly want to put both incidents behind him.*

An odd feeling twists through my gut relief or disappointment?

I look up at him again and see his finger has stilled he's almost come to a decision.

"Indeed." He finally stirs and catches my eyes with his. "I believe your idea merits a great deal of further research and development."

"Really?" Any attempt at maintaining a somber, professional tone is lost in the rising note excitement gives my voice.

He smirks. "Yes, really." There's the amused eyebrow. "Must I begin repeating myself for you, Professor Granger?"

*He's teasing.*

I shake my head.

*And I like it.*

A quick glance at my hands hides my blush, and I shuffle the pile of parchment, pretending to look for the piece I actually know is three up from the bottom. My hand quivers slightly as I pass it to him.

"First off then, I'll need for you to catalogue all known properties of the new ingredients so that I can construct best-fit variables for them." At least my voice sounds professional again.

He nods, and his long fingers absently stroke the sheet I've just handed him.

*Circe!*

~~~

March 30th, 3:05 pm

"Okay, now that we know the equations indicate that replacing the ginger altogether with crushed scarab beetles improves mental acuity, what would you like to focus on next?"

I refrain from replying until she looks up at me I find the more often I can maneuver her into staring at me, the greater the time she spends flustered.

"I have given it due consideration and propose that we repeat your concept of substituting ingredients with the constituents that originate from the Memory Potion."

The original idea was most insightful on her part. Such intelligence!

I pause for long moments, allowing my finger to tap my lips, and her eyes follow. While I cannot recall ever having had such a physical tic previously in my life, it is one I currently cultivate quite actively.

"In fact," my voice startles her from her reverie, "we should attempt to determine the effect of substituting the hellebore with Jabberknoll feathers prepared in a variety of ways."

"All right." Her bottom lip plumps as she releases it from the torture inflicted by her teeth. "How many different preparation types would you like to consider?"

Merlin, her mouth!

Patience, old man, patience.

I stroke the parchment in front of me, watching as her eyes track the movement. "If possible, I propose we run the calculations on feathers that have been chopped, shredded, or simply halved. Will such be possible?"

Her eyes flash at the challenge. "As long as you help me construct the correct variables, I can run any equations you need."

Such spirit!

"Shall we begin then?"

At her nod of acquiescence, I rise from my seat and advance around the desk to settle next to her. Turning slightly, I meet her gaze with an enquiring quirk of my eyebrow.

She flushes faintly and turns her attention to the parchments in front of her.

Perfect.

AN: I'm making very liberal use of the following quotation in how I'm imagining Arithmancy can be used: "Arithmancy is predicting the future using numbers." JKR interview, Royal Albert Hall, 2003. I also thank the HP Lexicon, where I researched the potions ingredients discussed here.

On to act three.

15: Rung Seven - Her

Chapter 15 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

15: Rung Seven – Her

June 30th, 3:05 pm

I walk quickly through a seemingly deserted castle.

I'm supposed to meet Severus at three to discuss our research project, and I'm slightly late.

We've only been having sessions once a month over summer hols, and I miss them. Therefore, I decided to go ahead and get ready for tonight's Victory Celebration, wanting as much time as possible for our meeting. It simply took longer than I'd expected, especially since I ended up changing dresses three times. Which is strange – I never worry this much about clothes.

Right. And all of this so-called not-worrying is why I find myself now wearing a red dress when I'd meant to wear the silver.

I hope he doesn't think it means anything. Because it doesn't. Really. It's simply a very flattering color for me.

Besides, he must have forgotten all about the ladder incident – look at the time he picked.

A blush heats my cheeks as I recall what occurred exactly one year ago.

It's well worth remembering. After all, it was the best orgasm of my life.

Composed – I must be composed.

Remember his tongue? His finger stroking my G-spot?

Reaching his office door, I pause to adjust slightly damp knickers. My hand trembles as I lift it to knock.

"Professor Granger." His greeting is perfunctory, but the tone of voice is neutral. I had expected sarcasm or coldness at my lateness.

"Professor Snape. I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"It is of no matter. I merely spent the time reviewing the notes of our last meeting."

As if he doesn't have everything memorized. He's far too brilliant not to.

Moving to the desk, I take the chair I've come to think of as mine and pull a stack of parchment from my briefcase to add to the already impressive piles of earlier work.

He settles next to me, and my pulse jumps when his knee brushes mine.

Calm, calm, calm.

A slow breath and I'm ready. "Since we last met, I have run a variety of equation sets to determine if adding moonstone for its calming properties would be beneficial."

"And?"

"Short answer – yes. Long answer – the best results were obtained when three powdered pieces are added between steps five and six of the traditional brewing process. Does that make sense?"

His immediate answer is to tap his lips thoughtfully.

Exactly one year ago those lips were pressed to my center.

I squirm a bit and hope he doesn't notice.

The finger finally pauses. "Yes. It is early enough in the process that the moonstone can exert a stabilizing influence on the later, more volatile ingredients, yet after the aconite has finished reacting with the scarab beetles." His eyes catch mine. "It makes perfect sense."

My smile must be contagious because I'm suddenly facing one of his – the largest one I've ever seen that appeared genuine.

It transforms his entire face. My breath hitches.

He's utterly striking.

And I'm staring.

Goddess, he'll never be traditionally handsome, but he is ... he is somehow all the more attractive and interesting for it.

"Well, good. That's sorted then." I glance at a parchment and clear my throat before meeting his eyes again.

His expression once again neutral, he answers, "Indeed. I will factor in your latest finding and brew the necessary batches by next month's full moon. The arrangements with Healer Shoredom at St. Mungo's are fully in place – eight victims of Greyback are willing to test our potion's efficacy. How fares the design of the questionnaire they will make use of?"

"I've added in your two suggestions, so it's ready. We should have them fill it out this month when they take their regular Wolfsbane in order to have a base-line reading to compare our potion against."

"Precisely." He looks pleased again.

"Any ideas as to what you'd like for us to do next?"

He gives me a rather intense look before answering. "I posit that we have gone as far as possible at this juncture with alterations affecting the ingredients alone. It is now time to switch our focus to the incantations involved."

"That sounds reasonable. Are there any specific areas you'd like to look at adjusting?"

"I had something rather more ambitious in mind, if you will indulge me."

"Go on."

"It is a well known fact that all language is metaphorical with every word representing something that it is not."

I know this – I've read it somewhere – some Swiss Muggle scholar – Saussure. "Oh, yes! That's why we can have different languages. A rose by any other name actually does smell as sweet whether we label it using the English word or the French, Japanese, Russian, etc."

"Precisely. In the Muggle world, that is the extent of the relationship between the word, the signifier, and the object it is meant to indicate, the signified. Magic, however, utilizes a person's association of the metaphorical word with a concrete object to manifest said object. It cements the formerly tenuous and arbitrary bond between signified and signifier." He pauses to ready his wand. "Therefore, I cast *Incarcerous* and rope, i.e., incarceration, manifests."

Wrapping around his wrist is a rope, the other end of which tickles as it flows across my left palm. My fingertips curl automatically around it to hold it in place and repeatedly stroke its softness. Hypnotized by the rhythm of the repetitive movement, my mind dredges up a truth I've been avoiding.

I'm never going to be able to talk with Ron as I can Severus.

This somber realization startles me to awareness, and I fully notice the rope in my hand for the first time. The rope that wraps around Severus's wrist. The rope he's given me control of.

Circe!

The blush that rises to my cheeks flares hotter as my eyes meet his and I see an intensity I thought lost from his dealings with me. Yet it is a look tinted by something more than the lust of a year ago, something I'm not sure I want to suss out.

I fear the answering skip of my heart.

He breaks the stretched moment by continuing. "I am proposing, if feasible, that we use the Arithmatical system you have developed to aid in creating entirely new incantations for brewing Wolfsbane."

Lost in thought, I mull over the possibilities presented. We'll have to choose a root language – Latin probably – but the real work will be in selecting the specific words.

How amazingly brilliant!

I lean towards him, eager for more, the rope clutched tightly in my hand.

AN: 'Some Swiss Muggle scholar' is indeed Ferdinand De Saussure, the founder of semiotics. Besides the JKR quotation from the end of the previous chapter, my concept of how Arithmancy can be used for Potions work is also inspired by molecular modeling (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molecular_modeling). I've done a double swot in this chapter – science and English nerdiness – forgive!

16: Rung Seven - Him

Chapter 16 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

16: Rung Seven – Him

June 30th, 3:05 pm

I glance at my clock, wondering where Hermione could be. Having specifically requested this meeting time in order to remind her of our dalliance a year ago, I can only hope her Gryffindor bravado does not fail her.

I want her to remember that occasion. I want her to dwell upon it. As I do.

The sounds she makes – breathy little gasps that send blood straight to my cock.

Every week of our summer separation, I have extracted that episode and viewed it in my Pensieve. Yet doing so is hardly adequate. I may be able to review how she sounds, but there is minimal visual stimulation due to the skirt of the red dress. Indeed, all of my other senses are decidedly shortchanged.

Her taste – Merlin, her smell.

They linger as a faint remembrance – too faint.

A knock sounds at the door, and I adjust my robes to hide my erection before I open it.

"Professor Granger."

"Professor Snape. I apologize for keeping you waiting."

Her formal robes part to show a hint of red fabric, and my breathing fluctuates. It is not the same garment as last year, but the color is amazingly similar in hue and tone. With hair twisted into a complicated chignon, she is lovely.

"It is of no matter." I struggle to prevent ardor from coloring my voice. "I merely spent the time reviewing the notes of our last meeting."

Once she has taken her seat, I move into the one beside her, making sure to graze her knee with my own. Her robes fall further apart, and I contemplate her dress while pondering my cock's seemingly conditioned response to her in that color.

My erection's plight only worsens as the combined scents of her skin and petitgrain surround me.

She smells divine.

Her words recall me to the meeting's obvious purpose. "Since we last met, I have run a variety of equation sets to determine if adding moonstone for its calming properties would be beneficial."

"And?"

"Short answer – yes. Long answer – the best results were obtained when three powdered pieces are added between steps five and six of the traditional brewing process. Does that make sense?"

I ponder the Arithmantic results in light of what occurs during that stage of brewing, making sure to adopt my new-found, finger-tapping tic before replying. "Yes. It is early enough in the process that the moonstone can exert a stabilizing influence on the later, more volatile ingredients, yet after the aconite has finished reacting with the scarab beetles. It makes perfect sense."

Capturing her eyes, I find myself reacting to her pleased smile with one of my own.

How very lovely.

Her eyes appear transfixed as we continue to regard one another for a stretched period of time; eventually, she glances away. "Well, good. That's sorted then."

"Indeed. I will factor in your latest finding and brew the necessary batches by next month's full moon. The arrangements with Healer Shoredom at St. Mungo's are fully in place – eight victims of Greyback are willing to test our potion's efficacy. How fares the design of the questionnaire they will make use of?"

"I've added in your two suggestions, so it's ready. We should have them fill it out this month when they take their regular Wolfsbane in order to have a base-line reading to compare our potion against."

Such intelligence, as always.

"Precisely."

"Any ideas as to what you'd like for us to do next?"

Why, yes, my dear. I do have quite a few ideas as to what I would prefer for us to do next.

My erection, which had subsided somewhat, twitches with renewed interest.

Refocusing on the immediate task at hand, however, I answer, "I posit that we have gone as far as possible at this juncture with alterations affecting the ingredients alone. It is now time to switch our focus to the incantations involved."

"That sounds reasonable. Are there any specific areas you'd like to look at adjusting?"

"I had something rather more ambitious in mind, if you will indulge me."

"Go on."

"It is a well known fact that all language is metaphorical with every word representing something that it is not."

Her response comes more quickly than might be expected upon being confronted with such a drastic change of topic. "Oh, yes! That's why we can have different languages. A rose by any other name actually does smell as sweet whether we label it using the English word or the French, Japanese, Russian, etc."

She is truly brilliant.

"Precisely. In the Muggle world, that is the extent of the relationship between the word, the signifier, and the object it is meant to indicate, the signified. Magic, however, utilizes a person's association of the metaphorical word with a concrete object to manifest said object. It cements the formerly tenuous and arbitrary bond between signified and signifier. Therefore, I cast *Incarcerous*," I pause to wave my wand, "and rope, i.e., incarceration, manifests."

Said rope grips my left wrist. And not just any form of rope – I visualized a very specific silken variation, which is highly pleasing to the touch. A tiny flick of my wand and the other end slithers into her right hand.

She unconsciously caresses the braided silk resting across her palm for a few moments. Then, flushes slightly when her eyes dart its length.

The coloring of her skin indicates that she understands at least part of my intended implications, but possibly not all. After all, it is only recently that I have been able to admit to myself that I would, in fact, bind myself to her in more than a merely sexual way.

Time appears to elongate anomalously as we continue to observe one another. I count her every breath, every blink, every caress of the rope – seven, five, eleven.

My observation is disrupted by a look of bewilderment flickering across her face.

I continue my proposal in an attempt to forestall any awkwardness. "I am propounding, if feasible, that we use the Arithmatical system you have developed to aid in creating entirely new incantations for brewing Wolfsbane."

The contemplatively inwards turn of her gaze is quickly followed by an assault upon her lower lip.

To taste her!

Suddenly, the expression she turns upon me is once more intent. Eagerness graces her features.

She continues to hold me bound.

AN: Did I mention that I'm a Ravenclaw?

17: Rung Eight - Her

Chapter 17 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

And Sporky1126 made me a lovely banner! I really like the shading and texture she's added. It's wonderful. Thank you!



June 30th, 7:35 pm

Standing in a corner of Grimmauld Place's decorated, and therefore marginally less-dreary, drawing room, I watch Ron.

He and Ginny regale a group with feats of Quidditch daring-do. The finishing of the current anecdote causes a wave of laughter. He's in his element.

Although reminiscent of last year's party, it's in sharp contrast to two years ago.

At the first Victory Celebration, Ron gave a simple, yet heart-felt, toast to Harry that left him quietly sobbing. My own heart hurting, I hugged him to me and stroked his hair before leading him out to the Burrow's garden to sit quietly for a bit. We cried and talked and eventually even laughed as we recalled some of our barmier antics as a trio.

I reveled in the comfort of holding a warm body a body belonging to someone I cared for, someone who understood.

When I finally shifted in preparation to stand, Ron's arms tightened around me in protest. "Mione."

"Come," I replied. Standing, I took his hand and Apparated us to the landing outside my flat.

By the time we got inside and to the bedroom, we were undressed. Leaving the room faintly lit by moonlight, we made love a little clumsily yet tenderly.

He cried a little after and whispered, "I just miss him so much. He was my best mate, and ..."

"I know. He was mine, too. But we've still got each other."

His hand rose and wiped away tears I hadn't even realized were bathing my cheeks. "Yes. Yes, we do."

We were inseparable that first summer of our relationship. It seemed that if the two of us were together, we could keep Harry alive somehow. I'd catch a glimpse of Ron out of the corner of my eye and automatically assume Harry would be next. Being together made it feel as if the possibility of Harry still existed.

It helped each of us.

But it's not enough to be going on with.

I sigh.

Even if there weren't the complication of Severus.

Gathering my fabled Gryffindor courage, I walk over. "Ron, can I see you privately for a moment?"

He turns to me with a big grin. "Sure, Mione. My bedroom or yours?"

Catcalls follow us as we leave the room, and someone, perhaps Dean, calls out, "Ron, you jammy git. She can't even wait a few hours to get her hands on you."

I grind my teeth to keep from grimacing as Ron turns to wave acknowledgement of their admiration.

I'm leading so that I don't have to look at him as we walk down the hallway to enter what used to be my room. For all of his bravado in the drawing room, I can't subject Ron to the memories of the room he shared with Harry.

Sitting on the bed, Ron grins leeringly and asks, "So, Mione, what is it you *want*?"

Circe what did George put in the punch this year?

I only hope it doesn't make things even worse.

Casting a quick *Muffliato* and ward on the door, I pocket my wand and sit down as well, but with some distance between us. Avoiding his gaze, I focus on my clenched hands where they rest on my lap.

"Ron, I've been thinking." My voice breaks. I clear my throat and continue quietly. "I've been thinking that things between us aren't as good as they should be for a marriage."

He's silent, and my peripheral vision shows him to be completely still.

"I know it's hard to talk about, but you must have felt it too." With the hardest part over, my voice returns to almost normal. "All of those awkward conversations, the bickering about nothing, the times when we don't seem able to even begin a conversation, the ..."

Goddess, I can't bring up the sex that would be cruel.

He doesn't say anything, and I can't stand the silence, so I continue. "I've been feeling this way for a while, and "

"How long?" His voice is so quiet, I'm not sure I heard him correctly.

"What?"

"How long?" This is louder but strained.

"Since Cornwall."

No reaction.

"I'm sorry, Ron." I reach out to touch his hand, but he jerks it away and leaps from the bed so forcefully the entire frame shakes.

Now he's yelling and pacing. "I could give a sweet fuck all if you're sorry, Hermione. How could you do this to me?" His hand rips at his hair.

It's my turn to remain silent.

"What?" He gives a viscous hand chop after every phrase. "You can't be arsed to tell the bloke you're shagging, the bloke you're engaged to, the bloke you say you love that you don't actually want to be with him?" His wild gesticulations, usually used to express happy excitement, serve equally well to punctuate anger.

"I do love you, Ron. I do. It's just ..."

"It's just what, Hermione?"

I don't know what to say that won't hurt him even more. It would be nasty to tell him the full truth, to tell him about the boredom.

"How could you say you'd marry me if you felt this way?"

This bit makes me angry, and I stand to place myself directly in front of him. "How could I not? It's not as if you left me a whole lot of choice, now is it, Ronald? You paraded your proposal in front of almost everyone we know! Yes, I had doubts then, but I felt trapped into accepting. You had never even talked about marriage with me. I had no idea what you were planning."

"Oh, that's rich!" He snorts and waves a hand dismissively at me. "Mum had been buying you magazines and showing you dresses and all kinds of wedding-type things for months."

"Yes, Ronald. Molly did do all of that. But *you* didn't, and it was you I needed to hear it from." I've been trying to keep both hands at my sides but find I'm pointing at him; I drop my right arm and clutch at the side seams of my skirt. "I thought we were thinking the same thing - humor the parents and keep things on an even keel. I thought I had time to figure things out, to figure us out."

He runs a hand through his hair. "And directly after? Why didn't you say something then?"

"I was overwhelmed, all right. Overwhelmed!" My hands once again escape my control and fly up into the air. "I'd just started at Hogwarts, it was my first time carrying a full teaching load, and I was trying to get some publishable research done. By the time I came up for air, Molly had so much of the wedding planned that I felt more trapped than ever. The longer it went on, the harder it was to say anything. Until ..." My hands drop, and I turn slightly away from him.

"Until what, Hermione?" His voice burns with rage. "Is it another bloke?"

Whirling to face him, I yell, "Another bloke? Have you not heard anything I've just said? When would I have time for another bloke?"

His voice turns plaintive as his hands reach out to me. "Well then, what is it? I can't get my head 'round this. You say you love me. What is it we can't work out?"

All of the anger drains from my voice, leaving it as hollow as I now feel. "I do love you, Ron. But not enough."

"Not enough! Not enough for what? What the bloody hell are you on about?" He's angry again.

I meet his eyes. "Enough for me, Ron." My voice drops to a whisper. "I don't love you enough for me."

He turns quickly away so that I can't see his face, but his shoulders tremble.

I walk forward awkwardly, a hand stretched towards him, wanting to give him comfort. As soon as I touch his back, his trembling turns to shudders and his sobs become audible.

Without turning, he chokes out, "Go, just go."

My arm drops, and my vision blurs. "Ron "

"Damn it, Hermione! Leave."

I force my hand to hold the wand steady enough to cast *Finite Incantatem* on the door. A door that slams closed behind me.

Thankfully, the hallway and stairs are shadowy even with the additional party lighting, and I'm able to make it out the door without seeing anyone.

A fine, drizzly mist darkens the already overcast evening and coats my face with a relieving coolness as I descend the front steps and move to lean against the railings in front of number eleven.

I did it. I'm free.

18: Rung Eight - Him

Chapter 18 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

Also, friends have made me wonderful banners! First up, the gorgeous one by sshg316 that perfectly captures the overarching symbol of the story. Thank you, sshg316!

□

18: Rung Eight – Him

June 30th, 7:35 pm

Standing at the bottom of the interior staircase of Grimmauld Place, I see Hermione leave the drawing room and disappear towards the first floor hallway with Weasley trailing like an over-eager pup. Neither notices me.

Why should she need to be alone with him?

I forego removing my frock coat and climb quickly to the landing to hesitate at the entrance to the teeming drawing room, contemplating following the pair to determine their actions. Minerva's greeting makes the decision for me.

"Severus, there you are! I've been wanting to speak with you."

"Minerva." I nod.

"So, how are you, Severus? Looking forward to the start of term?"

The relaxation of a month away from Hogwarts, a month away from certain memories, evaporates as my shoulders tense and spine stiffens. I do not deign to answer beyond a disdainful curl of lip.

"Severus," her voice drops to quiet concern, and she reaches out to lay a hand on my forearm. "Severus, you have to face this at some point in time."

"Minerva, I –"

"No, I won't listen to any more of your clever excuses. You were back a full school year and never once set foot in my office. It's time, Severus." She pauses to give me one of her sternest glares, which are typically guaranteed to generate capitulation in the stoutest opponent. "He wants to see you."

Albus! Albus, I cannot.

My arm trembles under her hand, and she pats it gently before raising her voice to a more normal tone. "Now, how goes the research?"

The shift in topic recalls me to myself, and I attempt to cover any previous lapses of composure with a lingering smoothness of manner. "Quite well. In fact, Professor Granger and I had a very productive meeting earlier today."

"She is something, our Hermione."

"Indeed. Collaborating with her has ... exceeded my expectations, so to speak."

Minerva laughs. "Oh, Severus, you needn't be so droll. She's simply the most promising young researcher we've seen in ages."

"On this, I will have to agree with you, as much as it pains me." My smirk dissolves as I continue. "We would not be nearly as successful if not for her brilliant idea of substituting various ingredients with similar properties. Indeed, she has proven to me that she is no longer simply able to memorize large amounts of information but also able to apply said knowledge in innovative ways. Such is the mark of a true researcher."

"Why, Severus, I don't believe I've ever heard you praise someone so highly before."

I have tipped my hand and must distract her from realizing the depth of my regard. "My dear, Minerva. That is simply because you do not eavesdrop when I speak of you."

Her laugh is quite loud this time. It appears a certain red-headed mischief-maker has once again seen fit to spike the punch – such would explain her loquaciousness. "Nonetheless, it's perfect that Hermione should succeed, if only to make a strong statement."

"And what statement would that be?" I punctuate my question with a slight quirk of brow.

"Why, she simultaneously proves that women and Muggleborn are by no means inferior. With you, a half-blood, on the project as well – a project, I might add, for the betterment of the lives of werewolves – I couldn't ask for better proof of my ideology. You simply must publish soon."

"We may very well have an initial paper ready by the end of the year."

"That's perfect, Severus." Her eyes move to track someone behind me. "Now if you'll excuse me, I really must discuss Ministry job listings with Arthur. None of the Auror recruitment brochures mention witches at all – can you imagine?"

"Of course, Minerva."

She strides determinedly past me, and I move seemingly randomly across the room. Yet I am nonetheless certain to situate myself so that I am able to stare down the hallway towards where Hermione disappeared with Weasley.

Various people swirl past my line of sight, but my years as a spy have taught me how to ignore unimportant distractions. I vaguely notice the multiple shocks of ginger hair, the laughter of inebriated young men, the din of multiple conversations competing to be louder than the execrable music.

I am successful in blocking my awareness of the other party goes until a forlorn Creevey halts directly in front of me to make ridiculous mooncalf eyes at the youngest Weasley, who cavorts with a boisterous Jordan.

Creevey is soon engulfed by the unsurprisingly intoxicated Thomas and Macmillan, the latter of which cajoles, "Come on mate, you know we're just taking the piss, yeah. Tell you what. We'll go out tomorrow night to that new club, yeah, Fantasia, on Knockturn Alley, yeah, and pull some birds."

His answer is half-hearted at best, and Ms. Weasley's enthusiastic attempt to probe the integrity of Jordan's tonsils using only her tongue does little for Creevey's demeanor. The hearty slaps of his friends hardly seem to cheer him but at least serve to propel him out of my way.

Gormless twits!

My continued contemplation of the empty hallway is soon interrupted by an overly cheerful voice. "Severus!"

I greet Tonks neutrally. "Nymphadora."

A grimace crosses her features, but she banishes it quickly. They are, at least, her features, even if her violet dress and hair are as outlandish as ever.

"I am surprised you were able to leave Shackbolt's side for long enough to greet me."

"Yes, well, I told him I was coming over to confirm that you've moved on to a new love interest." She looks over at him and waves.

His answering smile transforms into something harder as his eyes move from her to me. I prevent myself from smirking at his discomfort.

Gryffindors! Baiting them would be much more rewarding if they were not so obvious at every turn.

Turning a stern countenance on Tonks's cheeky grin, I reply coolly to the focal point of her sentence. "Love interest?" I raise a skeptical eyebrow.

"Oh, please, Severus. I do know you at least somewhat." She glances down the hallway and back to me as if to prove a point. "So, tell all. How long have you fancied Hermione?"

"I refuse to grace such an absurd question with an answer."

"Absurd, eh? So you probably don't care that she looked miserable from the time they came through the door this evening. That she's looked miserable for a while – months actually."

Miserable?

My heart speeds its syncopated beating as triumph washes over me.

She is miserable with him – thank Merlin!

Said joy is immediately tempered by another realization.

Hermione, beautiful, intelligent Hermione, has been miserable for months.

My stomach clenches in protest.

Why did I not see it?

“Severus.” Tonks’s voice barely registers as I make a vain attempt to sort through emotions both novel and unwontedly complex.

I refocus on my surroundings when a flash of red appears at the end of the hallway.

“Severus, go to her.”

There is no telling what Tonks has seen cross my countenance these last few moments – I have been uncharacteristically unguarded. But she observes me with such empathy that I decide this is one unintentional divulgence that need not be camouflaged.

“Go to her.”

Nodding quickly in acquiescence, I brush past Tonks and quietly follow Hermione down the stairs and out the front door.

It is time to see if my patience has been for aught.

19: Rung Nine – Her

Chapter 19 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

19: Rung Nine – Her

June 30th, 8:05 pm

I raise a hand to wipe away tears and feel the slide of metal across my cheek.

The ring!

Lowering my left hand to my right, I grasp the ring and slide it off.

The ruby appears almost black in the premature gloaming. The gold emits the last of the warmth taken from my body, cool but for where my fingers grasp it. It looks such a small thing on an empty street at dusk. How can it mean so much?

Oh, Ron ...

We should never have gotten involved. I'd still have him as a friend. If only ...

Movement in my peripheral vision reminds me that I'm on an open street. Grasping the ring with my left hand, I slide my wand into my right, arcing it along the inside of my forearm in case it's a Muggle.

Keeping my head down to hide tear-stained cheeks, I track the person surreptitiously. Black-clad feet and legs stop in front of me.

“Professor Granger.”

His voice is so familiar that my eyes flutter closed in relief.

“Hermione.”

He called me Hermione?

My eyes snap open as I raise my head.

He has a strangely hesitant look on his face. One hand rises to gently brush a tear from my cheek.

This time, he whispers. “Hermione.”

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry ...

Internal chanting aside, I feel tears welling in my eyes and my face contorting.

Suddenly, I'm enveloped, and my stomach twists with the disorientation of Side-Along Apparition.

My arms rise to loosely grasp his waist to steady myself, but I leave them there as I allow my body to relax against the warmth of his. Rubbing my face against the scratchy wool of his frock coat, I realize I can't smell his familiar scent.

I really need to blow my nose.

My rueful chuckle causes his arms to tighten around me.

And I must look a fright.

He says nothing, and this is more of a help than I'd ever have imagined. I'm able to compose myself somewhat after a few more minutes.

When I finally step away, his arms let me go without protest. Pocketing my wand, I turn to hide my face, but he recaptures my attention with a flutter of white – a handkerchief.

"Thank you," I mumble through blocked sinuses. Taking it, I wipe my face and dab at my nose, trying to remove the most liquid possible with the smallest sound.

"May I get you a drink?"

My stomach twists at the thought of alcohol. "Actually, some water would be lovely."

Finally noticing my surroundings, I'm confronted by books at every turn. The smell of paper is strong enough to impress itself upon my partially cleared nose. His Potions collection is of course impressive, but what catches my eye is what appears to be a first edition of Evatra Collison's *Arithmantic Uncertainty*.

I need to come back here.

I settle onto the settee and pocket the handkerchief as he finishes at the sideboard and joins me. The glass rests solid in my hand, the water cool and flavorless on my tongue.

"Hermione –"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

Amusement colors his tone. "We do not have to talk."

Suddenly, both of our glasses rest on a side table. His fingers glide over my cheek to brush against my ear. As they continue down my neck, a trace of fire burns along their path before racing ahead to tighten my nipples.

Soon after, his mouth joins his hand, and he runs his tongue from my neck to my mouth. This kiss is soft and gentle – a play of lips – nothing more.

It's perfect.

When he pulls away, my hands reach out to rest lightly on his shoulders, and a part of my mind wishes he'd remove the frock coat.

"Hermione." The husky timbre of his voice is as erotic as in past encounters, but it's edged with something I can't place.

I want to say his name, his given name, but as I open my mouth, he leans in again. Meeting halfway, our tongues dance lightly against each other. My hands slide up to tangle in his hair as his move towards my neck and waist. The tingling that began with his fingers grows and spreads to envelope my center.

Soon, his mouth slides to my throat, where the soft scrape of teeth and the hot wetness of tongue combine to make my clit pulse.

Goddess!

The very intensity of it brings me startlingly back to the present.

Shite! I did the same thing with Ron – I can't do it again!

A jolt of anxiety races through me, and I pull my hands from him. "Severus."

His continued assault on my neck causes another spasm, which is part pleasure, part panic, to shiver through me.

Ah – how am I supposed to think like this?

"Severus, stop. I can't do this. Not ..."

He pulls back, face stiffly blank. After a few moments, he asks, "Not now or not ever?"

"I ... I'm not sure. But at least not now."

Another pause. "When do you think you might know, Hermione?" His voice is grave.

"Know?"

"Know whether we are, in fact, something more than colleagues."

Circe! How am I supposed to make such a decision tonight?

"You have to give me time, Severus. I need time." I pause to take a shaky breath. "I only ... this evening ... and ... this is too soon." Another uneasy pant crosses my lips. "It's just too soon."

His movement from the settee to the bookcase across the room is as sudden as it is contained.

Having no idea what more to say, I concentrate on breathing smoothly.

When he turns to face me, his words are surprising mild. "Forgive me. I have been somewhat ... precipitous in my attentions." He pauses, his face neutral. "I have waited a year. I suppose it is possible to persist in doing so for a while longer."

Goddess, a year!

Suddenly, he swivels away from me.

Standing slowly, I walk towards him and place my left hand upon his corresponding shoulder. He's trembling.

"Severus," I whisper. "Severus, please try to understand."

His answer is to place his hand over mine, and we stand like this for long moments. The faint quivers subside.

I hate to leave it like this.

But I can't stay.

I squeeze his shoulder and pull my hand away gently. "I have to go. I ... I'll see you soon."

He doesn't answer, doesn't move.

Severus – I hope you understand.

I don't ever want you to be a mistake.

With one last look at him, I Apparate into the familiar sitting room, where I stand still and attempt to collect myself. The dark house breathes around me, full of childhood sounds.

I make the climb to the first floor quietly, neatly avoiding the squeaky third and seventh steps.

A sliver of light shines from beneath my parents' bedroom door, so I knock softly while calling, "Mum. Dad. It's me."

The door opens in a rush, and Mum takes a quick look at my face before pulling me to her.

Dad watches me from over Mum's shoulder. "Hermione, love. What is it?"

I hold up my left hand – the hand no longer bearing a ring. "It's Ron. I ...". And I can't do it anymore, I can't keep it in. My sobs sound overly harsh in the small hallway.

"There, there, dear." Mum's voice is soothing. "There, there. It'll sort itself out."

I'm held tightly in their embrace.

20: Rung Nine – Him

Chapter 20 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

Also, I'm able to once again decorate my story with a lovely banner that reinforces the story's main symbol - this time from the wonderful wsandrs! Thank you wsandrs!

□

20: Rung Nine – Him

June 30th, 8:05 pm

She leans against the railings, staring fixedly at something in her raised right hand.

As I approach more closely, I detect that she is inspecting the rather insipid ring Weasley mistakenly deemed appropriate to grace her finger. It no longer does so.

Has she finally freed herself of that pillock?

I can feel both my heart rate and breathing speed up as I continue to advance upon her position. By the time I arrive in front of her, the ring is no longer in sight.

"Professor Granger."

She does not look at me. In fact, her entire person remains unnaturally immobile.

Well, old man, it is time.

"Hermione."

The use of her given name has the desired effect, inciting her to raise her head, giving me my first unobstructed view of her countenance.

The wetness of sorrow marks her cheeks.

She has been miserable.

Surprisingly, my stomach clenches at the thought.

I raise my hand to wipe away the salty solution that lies upon one soft cheek, wishing it were so easy to rid her of the underlying melancholy.

"Hermione." My voice emerges as a whisper.

Her face crumples in upon itself as tears start afresh.

Realizing we should not remain in such an exposed location, I gather her to me and Apparate directly into the sitting room of Spinner's End. It is the first time I have ever willingly brought another person into my abode.

I would think nothing more of her arms rising for balance, were it not for the fact that she proceeds to leave them wrapped around my lower torso.

Petitgrain suffuses my entire sense of smell as I continue to hold her. I must acknowledge that its complexity suits her.

After a few moments, her small, remorseful laugh causes me to ponder whether I should speak or not.

What would be most appropriate to say?

Nothing suitable comes to mind, so I hold her more tightly to me.

Eventually regaining a modicum of composure, she removes herself from my arms and turns slightly away to hide the effects her distress has had upon her countenance. My handkerchief appears a welcome aid in facilitating this endeavor.

"Thank you." Her reply is somewhat muffled.

I turn to provide her with some small amount of privacy. "May I get you a drink?"

"Actually, some water would be lovely."

Procuring glasses from the sideboard, I pour a whiskey for myself and cast a silent *Aguamenti* in order to produce water for her.

The settee is small enough that it does not appear odd for me to sit somewhat close. I allow her time for a few small sips before speaking. "Hermione –"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

Talking is not exactly what I had in mind, my dear.

I voice as much in a low murmur. "We do not have to talk."

A large swallow finishes my drink, and I quickly set the glass aside before doing the same for hers. The hairstyle she currently models allows me to trace the ridge of her cheekbone, the shell of her ear, the line of her neck in an unencumbered fashion.

Leaning towards her, I lick away the salty residue that clings to the underside of her jaw before moving towards her mouth. Her lips are hot and trembling against mine. My cock twitches as it swells.

I pull back to look at her. Even with reddened eyes and nose, she is lovely.

"Hermione," I whisper as both question and promise.

Her lips part, and I move forwards to taste them. Our tongues remain gentle, touching quickly, retreating, only to return time and again.

Merlin, to feel her pressed against my cock.

I content myself instead with sliding one hand around her waist while the other strokes the enticingly bare back of her neck. Her fingers play along my scalp, sending pleasurable signals directly to my erection. Again my lips leave hers, but this time to assault her throat, where I breathe deeply of the scent of her skin.

I am mapping the exact dimensions of her pulse point with teeth and tongue when she speaks.

"Severus."

I offer a tongue-laved nip in answer.

She shudders.

"Severus, stop. I can't do this. Not ..."

Abandoning her neck, I look at her closely but am unable to discern adequate data to determine anything beyond the fact that she is troubled.

Fucking hell – not? – not what?

She appears unwilling to continue, so I decide prompting is in order. "Not now or not ever?"

"I ... I'm not sure. But at least not now."

My jaw tightens and I look away. "When do you think you might know, Hermione?"

"Know?"

"Know whether we are, in fact, something more than colleagues."

"You have to give me time, Severus. I need time."

I suppress the desire to snort.

"I only ... this evening ... and ... this is too soon." She pauses. "It's just too soon."

Bloody hell!

Standing abruptly, I stride to a bookcase and stand, keeping my back to her. My heart races, but it no longer does so due to passion.

Do not be a complete fool. She has, after all, only just freed herself from the ginger menace.

A few calming breaths later, I regain enough control to allow me to keep my features and voice somewhat neutral. Turning, I say, "Forgive me. I have been somewhat ..."

precipitous in my attentions." Her expression appears receptive, so I continue. "I have waited a year. I suppose it is possible to persist in doing so for a while longer."

A look of astonishment crosses her features.

I have admitted to too much – pressed too hard.

Idiot.

I pivot to lean upon the bookcase once more. After a few moments, her steps sound softly behind me, and her hand comes to rest upon my left shoulder, setting my muscles to quivering.

"Severus." Her voice is low and sorrowful. "Severus, please try to understand."

Unable to face her, I nonetheless place my left hand on hers. My eyes close.

We stand thus, linked by her hand, until it moves slightly, presses more firmly into my shoulder, and then frees itself from my person.

"I have to go. I ... I'll see you soon."

A few quiet moments pass before I hear the pop that heralds her Disapparition.

Eventually, I find that I have returned to the settee, head resting upon the cushion that faintly holds her scent.

If only I had coerced her, I could have had her.

Her face appears before me, but it is not flushed with passion, as I would wish to imagine it. Instead, tears glisten on her cheeks, her brow furrows with misery – she is as she looked standing outside of Grimmauld Place.

Once again, I find my viscera swirling with discomfort, but upon this occasion, I am able to deduce its source.

I could never have forced her.

I ... I truly care for her.

I sit staring into the distance, her visage a constant haunt. It is an interminable amount of time before sleep claims me.

AN: Thus ends act three. Next is an interlude chapter, followed by the fourth and final act.

21: A Half-Step between Rungs Nine and Ten

Chapter 21 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

21: A Half-Step between Rungs Nine and Ten

August 30th, 7:05 pm

I set two pints of bitter on the corner table of the Three Broomsticks and settle across from her. "Ginny, I can't thank you enough for answering my owl and agreeing to meet me." Pausing for a moment, I continue quickly. "Tell me truly how is he?"

She sighs. "He's ... he's a bit better ... now."

"Now?"

"Well, the first two weeks he simply sat in the corner of his sitting room in his ratty Chudley Cannon pyjamas and refused to move except to go to work. Even then, Tonks said he was so oblivious to his surroundings that she had to put him on desk duty to keep him from accidentally doing himself an injury."

Oh, Ron.

I can think of nothing to say and gesture for her to continue.

"I think it's the first time I've ever seen him refuse food. Mum was hysterical."

"Does ..." I clear my throat and start again. "Does Molly hate me?"

Squirming uncomfortably, she glances quickly away before her eyes return to meet mine and her chin raises. "Truth be told, I think we all did at first."

Tears form in my eyes, and I try to contain them by blinking rapidly. Shaky hands are easier to hide I slip them into my lap, and my left one buries itself in my pocket.

"It was just such a shock. One minute we're all planning your wedding and the next Ron is crying his eyes out at the Victory Celebration." She pauses, and the defiant look on her face fades. "But then..."

"Yes?" My voice sounds painfully hopeful.

"Then Bill told Ron about his first love a Yank he'd worked with in Egypt Jaqui. They'd gone out for seven months, and he'd been completely smitten, but she threw him over for her ex when she returned to the States. Bill went on and on about how he'd thought he'd never love again, never trust again all that rot. And then he told Ron about meeting Fleur and how smashing it is, how right it is that it's even better than it ever would have been with Jaqui."

I wait a few moments before prompting, "And?"

"And things got better after that. He began eating, visiting the Burrow on weekends, going down the pub with George of an evening."

I exhale in relief. "Circe, that's good to hear, Ginny. You have no idea how worried I've been. I know it may not seem like it now, but I do care for Ron. I never wanted things to end as badly as they did. I just couldn't ... I couldn't ..."

"I understand, Mione, really I do. That's why I came tonight. Once I got over my initial anger, I was able to see that it was similar to what I went through with Colin. I felt horrible when I broke it off with him, and I know I hurt him, but I had to do it."

We're both silent for a bit, sipping at our hither-to-now-ignored pints and looking around awkwardly.

Putting down my glass, I start again. "And what about the rest of the family how do they feel now?"

"Percy is staying out of it, but George and Bill have both been able to get Ron to admit that not everything was perfect between the two of you. It's been good for everyone in the family to hear. Dad was never angry with you only sad. But Mum ... well, she's going to take some time, if she ever comes around. I'm sorry, Mione."

A few tears reemerge to escape and slip down my cheeks. I brush them away quickly. "It's all right, Ginny. It's to be expected, really."

Sipping our drinks, we sit in a more comfortable silence than previously.

Do it, Granger.

I take a deep breath. "Do you think he'd want the ring back?" I pull it out of my left pocket, where I've been playing with it for the last few minutes, and place it on the table between us.

"Oh, Mione. I don't think that's such a good idea. It's still too fresh for him it would only stir it all up again."

"Then how about this? You take the ring and sell it, then use the money to buy him something, something he really wants. Maybe a new broom ... or a broom-repair kit and one of those smart Muggle dart boards he went on about last summer."

She stares at the ring. "I don't know how I'd explain the money."

"Tell him that you, Bill, and George scraped together to get him a prezzie to cheer him. Later on, when you think he'd be all right with hearing it, you can tell him where it actually came from."

Still looking hesitant, she remains silent.

"It is his money, after all," I remind her.

"I'll talk to the lads and see what they say." Sliding the ring across the table, she places it quickly in a pocket.

Thank the goddess!

She meets my happy smile with a look of determination. "But if he's never going to be all right with it, he'll never know it came from you."

My smile shifts to wryness. "Fair enough." I toast her with my glass before taking a large swallow. "Fair enough."

~~~

*August 30th, 8:05 pm*

It has been two months.

Two months since Minerva took me to task for avoiding the psychological quagmire of my past.

Two months of pondering the implications of emotionally attaching myself to someone.

Two months of attempting to force myself to confront him.

Standing in front of the Gargoyle, I once again hesitate. It has nothing to do with lacking the password Minerva has sent an owl post containing the updated phrase every Monday for the past seven weeks.

*Come on, old man screw your courage to the sticking-place.*

"*The Second Sex.*" My voice sounds rough to my ears, but the statuary reacts nonetheless.

For the first time in memory, I ride the staircase to the top without aiding my progress by impatiently climbing the moving steps.

The eyes of the griffin doorknocker widen as they see me, and the heavy oak door swings open before I even lay a hand upon it.

Fortunately, the room that greets me evinces differences even the superficial ones are welcome. While its dimensions and circular shape remain the same, Minerva's tastes in decoration vary from the previous occupant's. Gone are the smoking, whirling apparatuses of no obvious use; a statue of Dorcus Wellbeloved inhabits their place. Tartan throws decorate the armchairs, and heavy velvet drapes cover the windows. The desk also happens to be neater than I have ever seen it when the office is occupied by a true Head Professor one would have no idea that term begins only two days hence.

All such details keep me temporarily occupied and provide a focus for my sight, so that it in no way directly intersects with the portraits lining the walls.

*The vaunted Gryffindor bravery appears somewhat admirable at this point in time, does it not?*

The taunt has the desired effect the effect such gibes always seem to have upon me and I raise my eyes with sneer firmly in place.

Gazing straight ahead, the portrait I encounter is empty. Displacing my eyes to the left confirms that this is the case for the other frames along this wall as well. I turn slowly, haltingly towards the right until a portrait filled with presence comes into view.

He has waited for me to look at him before speaking. "Severus." Pushing visibly against the front of the canvas, his healthy hand reaches towards me.

*Albus!*

My legs unhinge. I find myself inexplicably kneeling on the rug and struggling for breath as my throat constricts.

I claw open my collar. The vaguely rational part of my mind whispers that such an action is for naught, that this is a purely psychosomatic reaction, after all.

My voice refuses to come, yet I attempt to force its use. A pain-racked croak is all that emerges.

*Albus.*

My stomach convulses in nausea as my viscera twist under an onslaught of intense pain. I fall forward onto my hands, continuing to gasp for breath.

Lifting my head, I look towards him once more. His blue eyes seem even more watery than usual, and it takes me untold moments to determine that this is due to a blurring of my own vision instead of a fault of the portrait painter.

*Albus...*

"My dear boy. My poor, dear boy."

His voice seems to come from a great distance, and my mind grasps naught but occasional phrases in between belabored pants. Yet these nonetheless coalesce into a somewhat coherent whole: "Severus, please ... you mustn't ... understand that I never ... can you ... Severus, my dear boy ... wrong ... shoulder such a great burden ... no one ... Severus ... forgive ..."

My breathing calms as his words continue to wash over me, and I settle back upon my heels while gazing upon him. For the first time in years, even if but weakly, I am able to vocalize his name.

"Albus."

*AN: Severus quotes Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth: "But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we'll not fail" (Macbeth I, vii, 60-1). The Second Sex is Muggle Simone de Beauvoir's foundational feminist text on the social construction of female gender roles.*

## 22: Rung Ten – Her

*Chapter 22 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

### 22: Rung Ten Her

*September 30th, 3:05 pm*

For what seems the fiftieth time, Kingsley leans over and gives Tonks the sweetest of kisses on the cheek. Her resulting smile is breathtaking as an expression of sheer happiness.

Looking around Tonks's sitting room, which is now Tonks and Kingsley's, I see their joy reflected on the faces of everyone gathered here. Almost every member of the Order under fifty is present.

Almost.

Ginny says Ron took security detail for their father's speech, allowing her to come to Tonks's birthday party. I almost believe that to be his only motivation.

Almost.

And Severus is absent. Perhaps he's unwilling to make Kingsley uncomfortable, perhaps bored by such celebrations.

*Perhaps he finds it too difficult to be around me right now, too.*

The lull in the gift opening continues as Susan and Dean set about Vanishing the mounds of wrapping paper Tonks tossed everywhere.

My glass is empty, but I decide not to join the others in the rush to the punchbowl since they're forming a bit of a scrum.

*You can do this Granger have a bit of a chat and all.*

Breathing deeply, I turn to the right to face Ginny head on.

But she isn't beside me or more accurately, her face isn't there. Instead, she's bent over digging under her seat, struggling to extract something, and muttering under her breath. Finally, she pops upright, and I see she's holding a rectangular package, which she holds out to me.

"Another one for Tonks? Wouldn't you rather give it to her?"

"No, silly." She smiles at me. "It's for you. Happy Belated Birthday, Hermione."

"Oh, Ginny."

*She's still my friend.*

My eyes come over all blurry. "Thank you. You shouldn't have, not with ..."

"Yes, well. It's not much no need to get flustered about it." She smiles widely, but then it slips a little. "I would have given it to you on the day, but ..."

"I decided not to have a party not with everything the way it was." I pause and then continue in an upbeat rush. "But my students were especially well behaved, and I had lunch with Tonks and a lovely dinner with Mum and Dad, so it was quite good."

"Good." Her smile returns. "Now, go on with you open it."

The paper shreds easily under my eager fingers. The book revealed is a large paperback in brilliant yellow and black. "*Algebra for Dummies*," I say, not exactly sure what to make of it.

Almost falling off of her chair with laughter, Ginny finally wheezes out, "It's a Muggle thingy a Muggle Yank thingy that they have in the shops here. Bill thought it was funny, what with it being similar to Arithmancy and all."

"Bill?"

Looking around the room, I see him watching us he gives a faint smile, which I return.

Even the rather infinitesimal nod from an unusually neutral-faced George seems a glorious thing.

"Oh, Ginny! It's brilliant! Thank you!" I throw my arms around her, and her answering hug, while not as tight as in times past, nonetheless squeezes a few happy tears from my eyes.

"Here now, what's this?"

I look up to see Ernie standing in front of our chairs.

"We've already got one pair of love birds going at it, yeah." He gestures towards Tonks and Kingsley. "Have a bit of pity on us poor single blokes."

We pull apart, and I look at Ginny. "You're still quite keen with that Bat-Bogey Hex, aren't you?"

She laughs and mimes palming her wand.

Ernie's face flushes as he moves away, our laughter following.

"Thanks, Ginny. I really mean it ... just ... thanks."

"Of course 'Mione." She looks quickly towards the settee. "Oh, look it's started again."

Tonks begins to unwrap the next present, and Ginny is bouncing excitedly beside me, so I know this one is from her.

Pulling out a purple lace corset and suspender set, Tonks immediately changes her hair color to match before turning her smile our way. "Cor, Ginny, it's lovely. And bound to make him do whatever I say. Cheers!"

Laughter ripples through the room, Lavender's shriek and Ernie's wolf whistle outdoing everyone. We've all had our fair share of George's infamous Berryful Birthday Blend, and someone's sorted the presents so that the more risqué ones come last.

Tonks holds the corset up to her front, and Kingsley whispers something into her ear that causes her to chuckle and blush faintly. No mean feat where she's concerned. One of her hands reaches down to briefly squeeze the top of his thigh before she begins placing the lingerie back in its box.

*They're so happy together!*

*If only ...*

Party noise swirls around me as people use the pause to chat and refresh drinks, but I close my eyes and allow my vision to fill with Severus's face. His dark eyes are watchful, as he's appeared every time I've seen him this past month. Whether in the corridors, at the High Table, during staff meetings, his eyes constantly watch me.

He's looking for an answer.

George's shout of "Here, there's one more!" snaps me back to my surroundings. "It's for Tonks," he calls joyfully, "but it might be better if Kingsley opens it." He and Bill push a large box garishly decorated in red and gold into the room, maneuvering it until it rests in front of Kingsley.

"Go on, mate. No tricks, I promise." Standing beside George, Bill's grin seems to channel Fred, so it's really no wonder that the highly trained Auror hesitates briefly before shrugging and ripping open the packaging with gusto.

Box within box within box it's like one of those Russian dolls my Nanna used to have. George laughs every time, with Tonks joining in, but Kingsley looks as if his smile is beginning to slip by the seventh one. Finally, he opens the eleventh box, and his expression changes from one of mild exasperation to shock. Lifting his hand slowly, he raises a pair of small red leather pants into everyone's view so small, in fact, that I'm not sure they'll fully cover his buttocks. His other hand displays a bottle of edible massage oil brightly labeled "Hot Cinnamon."

Our laughter is spontaneous and deafening, causing Kingsley to look up from his gifts to take in the room. His deep bark of amusement soon joins the rest.

This time, Tonks whispers in his ear as she runs one hand over the leather, pressing it to his chest. The air between them seems to shimmer with a magical haze.

I look at the joy that is Tonks and Kingsley. Their relationship now seems as if it were inevitable.

Only a week and a half ago, Tonks told me over lunch that she'd never been able to talk to a man as easily as she can with him, not even Remus. "It's that he understands me, right? That he thinks like I think, that we can really talk to each another." At my nod, she continued. "And it shows in the bedroom. Remus was tender, and Severus was talented, but Kingsley ..." Her voiced faded as her eyes grew dreamy and her tongue wet her lips.

My stomach tightened when she mentioned Severus.

*Talented, eh? Oh, yes very much so.*

"That's what you need, Hermione someone you can talk to."

My snort of something not quite laughter sounded skeptical even to my own ears. "Right. As if there are that many men who find Arithmancy fascinating."

"It doesn't have to be Arithmancy an all-around love of swottiness will do." Her grin was pure devilry. "And I can think of at least one man who could compete with you on sheer know-it-allness. Lots of talent that one has."

I stopped poking at my quiche and set down my fork.

*How in the world could she know? Or is she just guessing?*

"Tonks." My voice held a warning note.

"Just think about it, Hermione." She flashes me a mischievous grin before diving back into her ploughman's.

And I have.

And I do.

Especially as I watch them today, chatting and laughing and there for each other.

*Could Severus and I have well, not this, exactly but our version of this?*

AN: For fellow Yanks: UK suspenders = US garter belt; UK pants = US underwear. Thanks go to Shiv5468 for making me think about fit, well-oiled men running around in small leather pants.

## 23: Rung Ten – Him

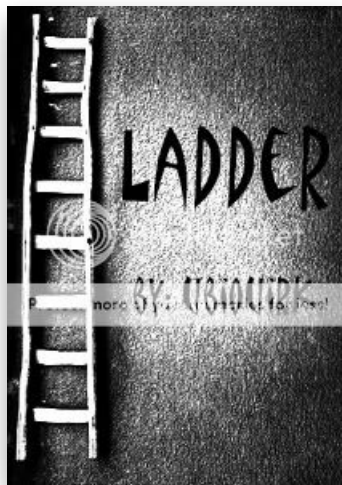
*Chapter 23 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

*JoyCrux has made me a bevy of beautiful banners to grace my chapters with! Here is just one of her lovely creations. Thank you JoyCrux!*



### 23: Rung Ten Him

*September 30th, 3:05 pm*

"Albus, really, this grows ridiculous. I must leave at once." I stand as if to give more force to my statement.

"There's no rush, Severus." He leans forward in his armchair, nose seeming to brush the inside front of the canvas. "I have it on very good authority that Hermione is also somewhat detained at present."

Pacing from one tartan-covered wingback to the next, I sigh and find myself running a hand through hair that would be disarrayed were it not for its rather lifeless character.

*Even as a portrait, his ability to see and know all is annoying.*

His subsequent chuckle borders on infuriating. "I notice you seem agitated. You're not anxious to see her, are you?"

My glare provides him adequate information for his guffaws to continue. Once he is again under control, he says, "Now, Severus, there's nothing wrong with admitting to your feelings for Hermione. She's an amazing person."

*Bloody hell! How does he know?*

"Really, Albus," I drawl in an attempt to make my voice as bored and disdainful as possible. "I do not see where it is any of your business as to the nature of my relationship with Professor Granger. Besides which, I really must be going."

"I know your meeting time was pushed back due to the birthday celebration for Nymphadora. In fact, if you are so concerned about missing Hermione's return, I will be able to tell you exactly when she enters Hogwarts's grounds." His self-satisfied smile is as annoying as ever.

"Manipulative old codger," I mutter loudly enough for his apprehension while concomitantly resuming my seat.

"And," he continues as if he did not hear me, "Minerva will not need her office even once this afternoon she's off giving her speech: 'It's a Magical World, Not Just a Wizarding One.' She's on right after Arthur. I highly suspect the members of the Wizengamot didn't know what they were letting themselves in for it is, after all, supposed to be their annual mixer instead of a political rally."

I find myself chuckling along with him. "More the fools, then. What is she specifically campaigning for on this occasion?"

He waves his healthy hand in a sweeping gesture. "She wants them to finally remove that dreadful Fountain of Magical Brethren from the atrium of the Ministry."

"You mean the abomination parading as artwork comprised of an insipid Quidditch-player sort being gazed upon adoringly by other magical creatures?" I snort and feel my lip curl disdainfully. "I must agree that it is long overdue to be melted down for cauldrons. It is beyond me as to why it was ever reconstructed."

"Indeed. Her argument is similar, even if worded somewhat more tactfully."

My sneer alters to a smirk, and I allow a hint of fondness to enter my voice. "Yes, quite the politician, our Minerva."

"It's actually the main reason I was able to get rid of the other Head Professors so easily." He gestures at the empty frames lining the walls. "There's nothing quite like watching politicians outplayed at their own game."

Our combined laughter richly fills the otherwise empty room.

As he leans back and settles more comfortably into his armchair, his eyes take on the cunning gleam that invariably indicates he is about to change topics to one I will be less pleased to discuss. "Now, Severus, about Hermione "

"Albus, I really do not know by what means you have formulated this preposterous notion of the state of the relationship existing between Professor Granger and myself."

"Severus, you've seen me every day for a month now, and for the past fortnight, you've spoken of her upon every occasion."

"In case your paint-addled faculties were unable to notice, I feel duty bound to remind you that she does happen to be my research partner." I grace him with my fiercest snarl. "We are colleagues nothing more."

*Nothing more, damn it.*

"Ah, but it is more than the frequency it is also how you speak of her, the note of longing in your voice." His expression grows serious, and he leans forwards once more. "You must remember that I've known you for over thirty years, Severus. How could I not deduce your affections?"

"My affections, if there should indeed be any, would not be nearly enough for us to qualify as having a relationship!" Abruptly, I find myself standing, hearing the echo of my vociferation resound around the circular room. It temporarily smothers the sound of the furious pounding of my heart.

*Good show, old man. He is undoubtedly thrown completely off course.*

I snort at my own rather pitiful attempt at sarcasm and turn my back to him. Merlin knows what expression my countenance evinces. Walking to Minerva's desk, I spread faintly trembling hands upon it and lean forward, applying weight to them. As I stare downwards, the wood's glossy surface seems to reflect the visage of another.

*Hermione!*

Her face is before me as it appeared all month during those moments when she seemed unaware that anyone could be scrutinizing her a face grown increasingly introspective as time passed. Ever more often I observed her gazing contemplatively upon a blank wall, lower lip mauled to a brilliant red. Initially, upon the occasions that she happened to notice my watchful regard, she gazed upon me neutrally for scant moments before turning her attention elsewhere. Then her perusals became more frank as they concomitantly increased in duration.

I know not what to make of it.

*Could the loss of her affiliation with Weasley truly be so traumatic that she requires such an inordinate amount of time for recovery?*

*Or has she reached her verdict and found against me yet hesitates to voice as much?*

Her countenance fails to provide answers.

*Yet I will not must not force the situation again.*

Even our research meetings have been suspended communication reduced to little more than the briefest of notes exchanged via owls, stilted greetings in the staff room and corridors.

Until today that is.

Today she will have to speak to me, even if only of trivialities.

*Since when have the results from St. Mungo's been trivialities?*

I let slip another snort.

"Severus," Albus voices quietly from behind me, "dear boy, do you not think it time to speak of it?"

Sighing, I pivot to face him once more.

His eyes no longer gleam with mischief and instead evince concern, indicating that he will not allow this topic to be disposed of anytime soon.

"If you so insist." Even I can hear the resignation in my voice, but at least the remainder of my physicality falls once more under my full control: face neutral, breathing and heart rate normal, hands steady.

Returning to my accustomed chair, I allow myself to fully rest against its back for the first time this afternoon. "Well, Albus. What is it you wish to know?"

Grinning in triumph, he replies, "Why not start at the beginning?"

*The beginning? When I mouthed and fingered her cunny until she almost lost consciousness above me?*

I snort.

*Best not tell the old coot that precisely.*

"Very well. I renewed my acquaintance with Hermione at the Order's 2nd Annual Victory Celebration. We exchanged ... words at that time, but it was not until she joined the teaching staff here that I came into closer contact with her." I catch myself before forming a smirk. "In fact, it was exactly a year ago today that I approached her about collaborating on the Wolfbane project."

"And?"

"And what, Albus?"

He fails to answer beyond waving me to continue.

Another sigh. "Very well, then. She is brilliant intelligent, intuitive, innovative. She is everything one could ask for in a partner."

"Simply a research partner, Severus?" Signs of mischievousness once more spark in his eyes.

My answering glare serves to send him into peals of laughter.

## 24: Rung Eleven – Her

*Chapter 24 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

*JoyCrux has made me a beautiful banner for all of the remaining chapters of the story! Here is another of her wonderful creations. Thank you JoyCrux!*



### 24: Rung Eleven Her

*September 30th, 7:05 pm*

I'm sitting on the edge of my settee when a knock sounds at the door.

*Thank Circe he got my owl!*

Running a nervous hand over my hair, I stand to open it.

"Professor Snape. Please, come in."

His nod is small, his expression neutral. "Professor Granger."

As he moves past me in a swirl of black robes, I take a deep breath.

*Right. You can get past this. Awkwardness is to be expected.*

Turning towards him, I find he's staring at the photo of me with my parents that rests upon the mantle.



"Thank you for agreeing to postpone our meeting until this time. I'm afraid the party for Tonks went on far longer than anyone expected, and I wanted to run a few more calculations before we spoke."

A deft arm movement spins the heavy robes from his body as he spins to face me before moving to hang them on the coat rack. "The results from St. Mungo's are too critical to put off for any longer. In fact, I was willing to make any necessary sacrifice in order to meet today."

"Yes. Yes, of course."

*Especially with the news I have!*

I move to the settee and gesture to the temporary table I'd transfigured to sit in front of it. "I've correlated the results you sent me yesterday with the earlier data collected by Healer Shoredom."

He settles beside me to my left, not overly close or distant, and I catch a hint of vetiver from his movement.

It's enough to speed my heart.

Fighting to keep my voice steady, I begin. "It actually appears to be for the better that we held off on our research a bit because we've been able to obtain two months' worth of control-group data. Using the questionnaire, we now have a very good idea as to the baseline relief offered by regular Wolfsbane Potion."

I stop and shuffle through the stack of parchments directly in front of me to pull out the appropriate results. They're third from the top, but I fumble about a bit hoping he'll fill the silence.

He doesn't.

*Why isn't he saying anything?*

"It's good that we collected data for two full moons," I repeat, "because there are small variances in the subjects' results. With only one month's worth of data, we wouldn't have been as sure of the precision of the answers after all, we're dealing with people's subjective assessments, not something we can accurately measure with an instrument. The extra month allows us to say that the results may vary slightly from person to person, but that each person remains consistent in their assessment."

"Good. I would hate to think that our delay brought nothing of value."

*He speaks! And he doesn't sound angry or defensive, thank the goddess.*

He gestures towards the parchments. "What exactly are the baseline numbers?"

"For now we can look at the averages for the group. Physically, their transformation-pain level was seventy-one percent out of a highest level of one hundred, and their transformation-discomfort level seventy-seven percent. So they're still experiencing a great deal of both using traditional Wolfsbane. Mentally, they understood that they are human fifty-seven percent of the time and could think rationally forty-nine percent of the time. Therefore, Wolfsbane is a bit more successful in this area, but there's still a great deal of room for improvement."

He looks directly at me. "And how does this correlate with the latest findings from Healer Shoredom?" Even his voice seems a bit more interested now.

*As he should be! This project is already a success!*

Glancing down at the numbers I double-checked only this afternoon, I can barely contain my joy. "We'll have to collect more data over the next few months, but, Severus, it looks so promising!"

As I turn fully towards him with a large smile, I catch him watching me intently, a slightly surprised look on his face.

"Do go on."

"Well, look here." I hold out the parchment with my right hand so that it hovers between us, and he grasps the other edge with his left to steady it. Using my left hand to point, I say, "See it's fabulous! With our Wolfsbane variant, pain and discomfort are down to sixty-three percent and fifty-nine percent respectively. And their ability to remember they're human rose to seventy-one percent with rational thought reaching sixty-seven percent. These are significant changes, and we haven't even altered the incantations yet!"

*Our reputations will be made with this!*

Still holding the parchment between us, he nods and raises his right index finger to tap at his lips.

How I've missed that gesture!

*And it has nothing to do with the lips or the fingers involved?*

I squirm a bit as my knickers dampen. And when he turns more fully towards me, I'm not sure which is more responsible for the thrum of warmth to pass through my body the brush of his knee against mine or his smile.

As at our last research meeting of three months ago, the smile transforms his face. Yet there are small changes as well. His eyes seem less haunted. Caught in his gaze, I'm suddenly physically aware of his presence. His body hums with energy, as it always does, but it has a ... a healthier feeling to it ... somehow less ... anxious, less knotted.

As if he's somehow even more alive.

My physicality reacts with a shiver as the fine hairs rise along my arms and across the back of my neck.

His smile shades slightly into a smirk and then he's gesturing at the parchment. "But these calculations are not predictions of the future; therefore, you cannot be using Arithmancy."

"You're right; I'm not. It's Muggle maths statistics. I couldn't find anything of the sort in Arithmancy or Astronomy for comparing sets of numbers to determine improvements it's as if such research has never been done before."

Eyebrow quirked, his voice sounds amused. "I think you will find that the Wizarding world is infamously slow to change. Most tend to accept the status quo instead of striving for true innovation, and unfortunately, researchers are not immune to suffering from such a bias." He pauses to tap thoughtfully away at his reddening lips while his left hand drifts towards his lap, pulling the parchment and my hand with it.

Once the backs of my fingers brush the top of his right thigh, I pull my hand away. But not before the contact causes a flash of tingling to sweep straight to my core. None of this is helped by the fact that the fingers of his left hand veritably stroke the now resting piece of paper.

When he turns his intense gaze upon me again, it takes a few extra seconds for his words to register. "Your work on solving large numbers of multiple equations is going to

revolutionize Arithmancy. I would expect that the process will eventually be denominated in your favor since you have succeeded in far surpassing anything Marchwood's work could have accomplished."

*Severus thinks that highly of my work?*

My shock must be showing because he chuckles a bit before answering, "You must know that I find you highly intelligent, Hermione."

The expression on his face makes my already speedy pulse erratic.

*Goddess!*

I jump up to pace in front of the fireplace. "Severus, I can't do this anymore! As crucial as these results are, as important as this meeting is, I can't ..."

*We may actually be able to have 'our' version of a happy relationship, and even if we can't, we're not going to be able to work together if we don't sort through this.*

*So do it, Granger!*

He's silent, watching me, always watching me these days with such intensity in his eyes.

I stop and turn to face him. Biting at my lower lip nervously, I'm not really aware of my action until I notice how markedly he's staring at my mouth. "Severus, I know."

"You know." His voice is flat.

"I know what I want us to be."

He quirks an eyebrow, but the rest of his face seems stiff.

I let it out of me in one breathless rush. "I want us to be more than colleagues."

He remains frozen for stretched moments, then, almost faster than my brain can process, he's in front of me.

My world narrows to a dizzying swirl of black wool and pale skin.

His hand hovers, not yet touching. Voice low, rumbling, he asks, "Hermione, are you certain? I ... need for you to be certain."

Sliding one hand up to hook behind his neck, I smile. "I'm more than certain, Severus. I'm utterly positive." I pull him the rest of the way to me.

As upon the previous two occasions, the kiss begins softly, teasingly, lips skating over each other to retreat slightly and return time and time again. One of his hands spreads across my lower back, and I feel the tips of his fingers dig into me slightly, pulling me closer. The other tangles in my hair, holding my head without hindering movement. I wrap my free arm around him and enjoy the feel of my breasts pressed tightly to his chest.

Then I open my mouth and brush him with my tongue so that his comes out to stroke mine. Fire flies through me a flame to my clitoris, which is beginning to demand stimulation. I whimper a bit and cant my hips towards him, feeling his erection against my stomach. His dark chuckle of pleasure shivers through me.

*Circe!*

I pull back and capture his dark eyes long enough to gasp out, "No ladder this time, no stone wall, or too-small settee I want you, and I want you on a bed, Severus."

## 25: Rung Eleven – Him

*Chapter 25 of 27*

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

*JoyCrux made me another lovely banner! It reminds me of the scene in the first two chapters. Thank you so much JoyCrux!*



## 25: Rung Eleven Him

September 30th, 7:05 pm

I pause before tapping upon her door, schooling myself to a state of seeming calmness.

*Merlin, I concede that Albus is correct when he says it has only been three months for her, but it feels an innumerable amount of time for me.*

My knock brings her quickly. "Professor Snape. Please, come in."

*She is eager to see me, yet we are back to formal titles?*

"Professor Granger." I keep my voice neutral.

Her sitting room is pleasantly decorated in warm browns and rich woods. But what pleases me most is the fact that only one photograph graces her mantle, one containing her and an older couple I assume to be her parents.

*So, the ginger menace is truly out of her life.*

*And she has invited me into her quarters, her home.*

*Each bodes well.*

"Thank you for agreeing to postpone our meeting until this time. I'm afraid the party for Tonks went on far longer than anyone expected, and I wanted to run a few more calculations before we spoke."

As her room is uncomfortably warm in comparison to the dungeons, I remove my robes. "The results from St. Mungo's are too critical to put off for any longer. In fact, I was willing to make any necessary sacrifice in order to meet today."

*Any sacrifice.*

"Yes. Yes, of course." She pauses to arrange herself upon the settee. "I've just correlated the results you sent me yesterday with the earlier data collected by Healer Shoredom."

Noticing that she has not squeezed herself into the settee's far edge, I take that as an encouraging sign and make sure to seat myself at a normal distance close enough to touch easily yet not so near as to be overly suggestive.

"It actually appears to be for the better that we held off on our research a bit because we've been able to obtain two months' worth of control-group data. Using the questionnaire, we now have a very good idea as to the baseline relief offered by regular Wolfsbane Potion."

As she pauses in order to determine which parchment she requires, I take the opportunity to observe her. It is the first time we have been in such close physical proximity since that fateful night of three months ago.

She is beautiful.

She has not, of course, been weeping upon this occasion, so it is normal to expect an improvement in appearance. But it is something more than simply a lack of redness around the nose and eyes that adds to her loveliness. There is a ... lightness to her that I do not ever remember detecting during the year past, a relaxation of the jaw muscles and shoulders.

*She truly was miserable, and I failed to note it I never actually saw her as she was.*

*But, if allowed, I will strive to do so in the future.*

"It's good that we collected data for two full moons because there are small variances in the subjects' results," she continues. "With only one month's worth of data, we wouldn't have been as sure of the precision of the answers after all, we're dealing with people's subjective assessments, not something we can accurately measure with an instrument. The extra month allows us to say that the results may vary slightly from person to person, but that each person remains consistent in their assessment."

"Good I would hate to think that our delay brought nothing of value."

*If only such were the case for other matters as well.*

Waving at the parchments she holds, I ask in a voice schooled to neutrality, "What exactly are the baseline numbers?"

"For now we can look at the averages for the group. Physically, their transformation-pain level was seventy-one percent out of a highest level of one hundred, and their transformation-discomfort level seventy-seven percent. So they're still experiencing a great deal of both using traditional Wolfsbane. Mentally, they understood that they are human fifty-seven percent of the time and could think rationally forty-nine percent of the time. Therefore, Wolfsbane is a bit more successful in this area, but there's still a great deal of room for improvement."

*Indeed, this gives us ample opportunity for success!*

I doubt I ever realized just how much 'room for improvement' there was with the Wolfsbane Potion. It is no wonder Lupin always appeared so physically ragged and careworn.

"And how does this correlate with the latest findings from Healer Shoredom?" I ask.

Her joyous expression almost tells me more than her words, and it certainly conveys the message instantaneously. "We'll have to collect more data over the next few months, but, Severus, it looks so promising!"

*Is she even cognizant that she has called me by my given name?*

"Do go on."

"Well, look here." Extending the parchment into the space between us, she waits for me to stabilize my side of it before pointing to the pertinent figures involved. "See it's fabulous! With our Wolfsbane variant, pain and discomfort are down to sixty-three percent and fifty-nine percent respectively. And their ability to remember they're human rose to seventy-one percent with rational thought reaching sixty-seven percent. These are significant changes, and we haven't even altered the incantations yet!"

*Thank Merlin! Such success will go a long way towards ameliorating any remaining prejudice against me in the Potions arena. The journals will be forced to publish such results.*

Upon seeing her rather glazed and flushed expression, I realize that the tic I cultivated so purposefully has truly become a part of my being. My finger now taps lips

seemingly of its own accord.

It is fortunate that it appears to have lost none of its allure for her.

And equally true that when such a look graces her countenance blood stirs to life in my cock. Of course, the brush of my knee against hers only serves to further matters, and the smile I initially turn upon her must contain more than a touch of the feral.

Yet the pure joy on her face causes an alteration in mine, and I find myself returning her smile with utter sincerity.

Or at least until the moment that I observe a quiver of arousal cross her face and soon after the rest of her person; then, I must concede, my expression becomes once more a smirk even if this time it is rather smug. Concomitantly, my erection springs to full life, straining against cloth, straining towards her.

*Perhaps you should be somewhat subtler than that, old man.*

Returning to the matter at hand, I wave towards the parchment we hold suspended between us. "But these calculations are not predictions of the future; therefore, you cannot be using Arithmancy."

"You're right; I'm not. It's Muggle maths statistics. I couldn't find anything of the sort in Arithmancy or Astronomy for comparing sets of numbers to determine improvements it's as if such research has never been done before."

*Another incident of inventiveness. Brilliant!*

"I think you will find that the Wizarding world is infamously slow to change." Amusement colors my voice. "Most tend to accept the status quo instead of striving for true innovation, and unfortunately, researchers are not immune to suffering from such a bias."

As I resume tapping my lips, although consciously this time, I make use of the temporary lull in conversation to maneuver her hand towards me by lowering the parchment onto my legs.

The touch of her hand upon my thigh is almost more exciting than having her actually palm my erection, which twitches in a jolt of tingling sensation.

*Merlin, to feel said hand upon my cock!*

I detect an irregularity in the rhythm of her breathing and scrutinize her visage peripherally. Yes she appears affected as well there is a decided flush staining her cheeks as her eyes follow the fingers I now use to stroke the parchment.

*Remember that this is a slow seduction, old man entice her.*

With such in mind, I return my focus to her warrantably laudable intellectual feats. "Your work on solving large numbers of multiple equations is going to revolutionize Arithmancy. I would expect that the process will eventually be denominated in your favor since you have succeeded in far surpassing anything Marchwood's work could have accomplished."

The utter level of astonishment she evinces via wide-eyed staring and mouth gaping elicits a laugh. "You must know that I find you highly intelligent, Hermione."

*My beautiful, brilliant Hermione.*

Who surprisingly leaps from the settee to crisscross the end of the room. "Severus, I can't do this anymore! As crucial as these results are, as important as this meeting is, I can't ..."

*Fucking hell! I cannot believe that I have so misread the situation!*

My heart pounds fiercely under an onslaught of adrenaline, which sends animalistic signals to my hind brain: fight ... flee ... fuck... Only years of self-restraint enable me to remain still for the next few moments.

She halts her perambulations to confront me head on, her reddened lower lip springing free from sharp, white teeth. "Severus, I know."

"You know."

"I know what I want us to be."

Maintaining a blank countenance has rarely proved as difficult as I find it now, especially as I find myself curling my hands into tight fists to keep from springing up to yell for her to just bloody well get on with it!

"I want us to be more than colleagues."

*Merlin, yes!*

And suddenly I can breathe, I can move. Energy uncoils from within to move me seemingly effortlessly, for the next thing I know, I stand before her, drawing in her unique scent of petitgrain, watching her face for stretched moments that undoubtedly take less than a second in objective reality.

As I reach for her, I pause for confirmation, my voice hushed in a nonsensical attempt to not startle her from this decision. "Hermione, are you certain? I ... need for you to be certain."

Her eyes are joyously clear, her smile breathtaking. "I'm more than certain, Severus. I'm utterly positive." Feeling her hand upon the bare skin of my neck is my final undoing.

Our lips meet in a dance of fleeting sensation a whirl of soft flesh and moist heat as we tease and delight, retreating to only advance again. Both of her arms serve to bring me ever closer as I add my own impetus to the movement by palming her lower back to draw her flush against me.

The hot wetness of her tongue laves my lips, and I open so that mine may join hers in an escalation of the dance. Her breathy whimpers inflate my already engorged erection, and I strain to press it against her, reveling in the pressure and warmth of her body. A body that struggles to be nearer, that I can feel striving for fulfillment. I make no attempt to stifle the chuckle of delight her movements cause me to bring forth.

*Damn, I want this woman!*

When she pulls her lips from mine, she at least does so for a good reason. "No ladder this time, no stone wall, or too-small settee I want you, and I want you on a bed, Severus."

My only response is a growl that cannot be silenced even by crushing my open mouth to hers once more.

## 26: Rung Twelve – Her

Chapter 26 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

*Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.*

*Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.*

*Thanks go again to the wonderful JoyCruz, who made this lovely banner! I really like its ethereal quality. Thank you JoyCruz!*



### 26: Rung Twelve Her

September 30th, 7:35 pm

Pulling back from the kiss, he murmurs, "Contraception?"

"I took a dose of Strigo Conceptus Potion an hour ago. It should be effective for an entire month."

He smirks. "And priced accordingly. You were so convinced of this evening's outcome?"

*That hopeful.*

But I practice a smirk of my own and reply, "Yes."

Voice low and rough, he says, "Then I suppose we should endeavor to get your money's worth."

His mouth is hot on mine as we move towards the bedroom. When my back hits the doorframe, we pivot around that point instead of losing momentum so that he becomes the one backing towards the bed.

By the time his legs hit its edge, I've pulled my mouth from his, and I'm about to growl at the prolonged effort of unbuttoning his frock coat.

*Why didn't I research a charm to do this?*

He laughs, a dark shiver down my spine, and presses my fingers away to run his through the buttons quickly. How deliciously dexterous! Tossing the coat onto a chair, he turns his attention to his shirt.

Once it similarly hangs open, I reach to push it from his body, trailing my hands across his skin. This much, I long to do. I lean in to place a kiss on his chest, breathing in the scent of skin unmasked by the vetiver that clings to his clothes, nuzzling the hair dusted across his pectorals.

Then his hands strip me seemingly effortlessly of my robes, sliding down my back and cupping my arse. When we come together this time, there is the sensation of skin on skin and warmth radiates through me from everywhere we touch, and my heart, already quickened, speeds yet another bit. Wetness tickles across my labia.

Hunger underlies the play of tongues, the glide of lips, and the nip I make before pulling back to stretch awkwardly for my bra clasp.

*Shite! Why didn't I wear a front-closing one? I want more skin now!*

Then, those capable fingers glide up my back and dispose of the problem readily, continuing forward to palm my breasts as the cups drape loose. I shiver. He squeezes, nipples clasped between thumbs and index fingers, and a flurry of electrical impulses race along nerves from pebbled flesh to pulsing clit.

I shrug the bra off, pushing forward, and his hands drop to my hips so that I can drag my breasts back and forth across his chest, reveling in the feel of hair and skin and him.

He gives a low moan and his fingers tighten on my hips.

Yet the scratch of wool against my lower abdomen becomes an irritant, and I push back to remove the offending garment, tugging on his waistband. There are only five of these buttons, and I actually linger a bit longer than necessary undoing them, allowing the backs of my fingers to tease his cock through his pants, enjoying his indrawn breaths and the hunger in his eyes when I take a quick glance at his face.

One small shove, and the trousers pool around his ankles, leaving only tented black boxers and damp red knickers separating us. I step back. Our last bits of cloth slide off quickly, removed by our own hand.

I'd probably be more self-conscious if it weren't for the intensity of his expression concerns over breast and buttock size melt under its heat.

And then there's the fact that I'm fairly distracted by seeing him naked for the first time.

Thin yet toned all muscles standing out in relief, starkly defined. There isn't an ounce of spare flesh to be found.

*Perhaps because it's all in his cock?*

Said organ is a good seven inches in length and of a nice thickness. It's also already so erect that the foreskin has almost completely pulled back from the tip, exposing the darker, more sensitive flesh.

Stepping forward, I lick my palm and run its flat wetness over the head, smiling to hear him hiss as his hips buck slightly. My clit pulses in response. After a few such swipes, I raise my hand to rewet it, tasting him for the first time salt with a tinge of bitter.

Yet as I move to touch him again, he stops me. Looking up from his cock, I see his face wears the carefully neutral look I've come to associate with him hiding something. "Hermione." It comes out a bit strangled, and he clears his throat. "Hermione, I am afraid that I will not be able to withstand a great deal of preliminary stimulation this evening."

Oh.

*Oh.*

I smile and mount the bed, turning to beckon him.

Lying side by side, we kiss in a swirl of tongues while touching freely. I wrap one hand around his cock, enjoying the feel of the slide of skin over hard core. His hips jerk, and suddenly fingers that had been on my nipples magically reappear to stroke my labia, circling teasingly around clitoris without providing satisfaction. My hand tightens on him, and I whimper into his mouth, sparking an answering groan.

His mouth traces a burning path down my throat to my left breast. As his tongue flicks across my nipple, I emit a little grunt and arch at the sensation, causing his fingers to brush across my clit. An electric arc leaps between the two points.

*Circe!*

My fingers tighten on him, causing his cock to twitch and his breath to catch.

Switching between running his tongue over one breast and then the other, he sets his fingers to teasing my entrance, and when I wiggle to hint that I want penetration, he chuckles and lifts his head to rumble, "Not tonight, my dear. Tonight nothing shall be inside of you until my cock has had the privilege."

*Shite! Could he be any sexier?*

My gasp of excitement causes him to smirk smugly before lowering his head to tongue my right nipple once more.

"Severus."

*Goddess, could I sound more breathless?*

Another pass of tongue and twirl of finger, and I arch off the bed again. "Severus."

He stops and raises his head to look at me.

"Don't hold me to this in the future, but you're not the only one who doesn't need a lot of foreplay tonight." I stretch my other hand down to cup his bollocks and roll them slightly.

Groaning, his eyes shut briefly, and when he opens them again, he smirks with amusement, his voice emerging a smoky rumble. "I do hope this does not indicate that I will have to provide another eighteen months worth of such in order to be inside of you again."

"Circe, no!"

"Good." The smirk fades, leaving behind hunger as his voice drops to a low rumble. "Because I do not think myself capable of such forbearance a second time."

His cock twitches again, and as if it flipped a switch, suddenly he's moving. I roll onto my back, and he props up my hips and slides a pillow under my arse, raising me so that my legs splay open, fully exposed. Kneeling, he uses his right hand to run the head of his erection up and down me, coating it in wetness before teasing my swollen nub.

"Severus." I reach out to him through the haze of tingling pleasure, running my hands across his chest, rubbing against his nipples.

Smirking faintly, he places himself at my entrance and pauses. Once our eyes meet, he gives the slightest push of his hips, and the head slides into me. He holds himself rigid for a few moments mouth open, eyes drifting shut.

It feels wonderful, the stretch, but it's not nearly enough. I wiggle again and squeeze my muscles around him, making his eyes fly open, dark and intent.

Still holding his cock in place, he leans forward, placing his hands on the bed on either side of my shoulders and lowering himself for a kiss. His weight a wonderful pressure on my breasts.

As our lips meet, he slides into me ever so slowly for only a short distance. Then back out with equal deliberation, setting a torturous pace. Each thrust places him a little deeper, his cock stretching my entrance, the ridge of his head scrapping against my flesh with every withdrawal.

Tilting my hips even more, I wrap my legs around him, locking ankles at his lower back while my hands clutch the upper.

"Hermione." My name a groan.

I feel I'll go mad at the slowly building warmth, so perfect because it makes me long for more, more, more while I also never want it to end.

Until he reaches the point where he begins to stroke my G-spot.

*Goddess!*

My muscles clamp in response as the pleasant sensation of being filled is overwhelmed by a more intense tingling. Every slow withdrawal amps the sensation higher. Each pause he makes before entering again maddening. The return slide so deliciously slow that every nerve ending hums with a sensation that only builds as he touches the sensitive bundle of nerves, sliding over it again and again.

He's panting into my neck and across my ear as he places wet kisses every few strokes. The sound of his arousal is heady, and I turn my head, nuzzling sweat-scented

skin, to capture his lips again, licking at them with fervency.

I begin to pulse my muscles rhythmically opening for penetration, tightening for withdrawal, making him hiss an indrawn breath as I do. Always increasing my own pleasure as well.

He raises up to a kneel, and my legs unwrap to spread back instead, changing the angle once more. I can also look down to watch his cock as it slides in and out of me, my labia pulling after it as if reluctant for it to go, a visual expression of my body's hunger for him. The sight amps the tingling warmth centered in my clitoris.

Then he grasps my right hand in his left and brings it to his lips. Sucking on my fingers, he laves them with his tongue, coating them with wetness. Once finished with this assault, he whispers, "Touch yourself."

Thumb pulling back the hood, I run a saliva-slicked middle finger across my clit.

*Ah, Circe!*

A flash of fire from the swollen bundle of nerves and a spasm runs through my center, making my muscles clench, forcing his head even more firmly against my G-spot.

Our moans are simultaneous, even if his is lower of pitch.

Placing his hands on the underside of my knees, he pushes my thighs back even farther, stretching tight the skin of my groin, opening my labia more fully. It concentrates the sensation of his cock inside of me, and I groan in appreciation, finger moving more rapidly across clitoris. I'm panting now, breathing more and more shallowly.

I look up to see him also watching where our bodies are joined, the open-mouthed look on his face one of pleasure and fascinated concentration.

As each stroke takes him deeper, he begins edging towards full penetration, and a third feeling adds to the tingling already emanating from my clit and G-spot.

Then the three places begin to merge into one overwhelming sensation. My legs begin to shake. He pulls almost all the way out, the delicious withdrawal amazingly intense, and I feel the first pre-spasm of orgasm.

He must have felt it as well, for he meets my eyes as he slowly slides into me this time until I feel his head bump against my cervix. A flash of pleasure shoots through me and my muscles clench around him as tightly as possible, unwilling to let go. Watching me, he pulls back only a bit and then moves forward again. Pulse. I stop breathing. Another short withdrawal, and this time he pushes against my cervix and remains pressed firmly against it as my finger blurs on my clit.

*Oh, oh, oh, shite ... Severus!*

An exploding vibration spirals outwards from my core a wash of energy that tingles out to fingers and curling toes; my cunt spasms frantically as my entire center burns in blazing sensation; my mouth gapes open, and my upper body arches, yet I struggle to maintain eye contact with him even as darkness fills the edges of my vision; and my throat emits a high keen while a rushing hum fills my ears.

Aftershocks work through me as he moves again, speeding his rhythm until his hips jerk, burying his cock as his entire body tenses forward; mouth open, expression one of shock, he groans loudly. Yet his eyes remain with mine.

He is beautiful in that unguarded moment when he comes.

~~~

I'm walking a corridor of Hogwarts, looking for something important, through I'm not sure what it is; abruptly I'm standing on a stage, Severus beside me. Most of the audience is a blur, but I recognize one small gathering in front Ginny, Tonks, and Minerva, all smiling and waving. Then a rather important-looking wizard is handing me a large trophy that strangely looks like the one given at Hogwarts for the House Cup. But I know it isn't it's a Potions award of some sort. As I try to read the inscription, however, my hair falls across my face as it often does, and I frown, unable to move arms weighted by the prize.

Then warm fingers are on my cheek, pushing the tickling mass away, and I know they belong to Severus.

And I know that the award was both dream and waking reality.

Opening my eyes, I see Severus lying in my bed, watching me with a face once more carefully neutral.

He's still beside me.

I reach out to touch him, smiling with joy at finding him here, and his façade cracks, a softening around the eyes just before his lips twitch upwards.

I already treasure his rare smiles.

27: Rung Twelve – Him

Chapter 27 of 27

Victory did not make life perfect, and two years on, the shock of surviving the war is finally starting to wear off. Waking to everyday realities, Hermione and Severus discover the delights and pains of living - all prompted by a ladder. HG/SS eventually, but HG/RW and SS/NT for the first bit.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Special thanks go to JKR for sanctioning HP fanfic.

Gobs of thanks go to my beta Southern Witch 69 and to my Brit-picker the amazing Saracen77.

JoyCrux made me a last beautiful banner for the story! I love the way the ladder climbs into the sky! Thank you, JoyCrux!



27: Rung Twelve Him

September 30th, 7:35 pm

In order to spare the distraction of mundanities at a more crucial moment, I query, "Contraception?"

"I took a dose of Strigo Conceptus Potion an hour ago. It should be effective for an entire month."

"And priced accordingly. You were so convinced of this evening's outcome?" My smirk may be somewhat smug.

Perfect.

Her return smile seems more sardonic than usual. "Yes."

"Then I suppose we should endeavor to get your money's worth." My mouth meets hers.

The dance to the bedroom is a flurry of lips, tongues, and hands complete with a half-twirl that changes who leads whom midway, though my erection, dousing rod that it is, remains fully fixed in its focus upon her.

It is not until our momentum is halted by my impact with the bed that we break apart enough to begin the suddenly serious task of disrobing.

Yet her face forms a moue of frustration before her hands are able to venture any lower than the region of my neck.

Laughing, I relieve her of the tedious task of unbuttoning my frock coat a matter I have ample practice with and similarly dispense with opening the front of my shirt.

The time for dalliance ends.

Especially once her hands are upon my skin, her lips brushing over my chest. Such simple actions, yet already I find my pulse speeding, my breath quickening, my cock growing insistent.

Even more quickly than I divested myself, I remove her robes, slipping them from her form and following their path with my hands until I encounter her silk-clad buttocks, which I clasp almost involuntarily.

It is of little consequence who pulls whom in for this kiss. Its import comes from its fervency the sheer hunger of bathing in heat and wetness and striving effort. The warmth building in my erection begins to expand to encompass my bollocks, and my cock twitches as she gently bites my lower lip.

Steady, old man. Remember the reward of patience.

When she attempts to rid herself of her brassiere, I glide my hands up her back, slip the clasp, and continue forward. Soft so soft, her skin brushed silk beneath my fingertips, her breasts a pleasant weight in my hands, her nipples hardened to sensitivity as I squeeze.

Her tremor prefaces a quick movement to fully discard the garment before she moves into me to rub breasts across me, nipples tracing paths of fire.

Merlin, how exquisite.

A moan escapes me, and I pull her closer, ever closer, relishing the pressure against my cock, the intensified tingling sensation along its length.

She breaks the kiss to step back, but only with the best of intentions. Her fingers caress my straining erection as she slowly unbuttons my trousers, and even through the fabric of my pants, I feel the heat of her fingers. Each brush sends a rush of warmth sparking along my cock as I find my breathing somewhat labored.

It is almost as titillating to observe her hands doing so, and adrenaline incites a vibration that oscillates through the long muscles of my body.

Once the rather bulky woolen garment has been disposed of, she retreats a step farther.

In unspoken accord, we remove our own remaining undergarments, eyes fixed upon the other, staring as we both bend to stand upright again.

Finally free, my erection hangs with the familiar feeling of heaviness my body associates with incipient gratification.

Yet my physical pleasure fades for a moment always present, but no longer in my forethoughts for Hermione stands before me fully unclothed.

Her breasts are modestly sized yet pert, nipples erect; her hips flare nicely, framing a trimmed triangle I have not yet seen from this angle; her skin is pale yet flushed across cheeks and décolletage.

She is beautiful. Beautiful in her arousal. Beautiful in her response to me.

And let there be no doubt that I will have her respond.

Before I can set any such plans in motion, she steps close to slide one deliciously wet palm across the very tip of my cock.

Bloody hell!

My body bucks to her repeated touch as the bursts of energy flash from the head of my cock across bollocks and upwards along my spine, and I feel a responding tightening in my sac.

The intensity of my arousal barely lessens as she ceases touching me in order to rewet her palm with swipes from her tongue. My eyes track every motion of the wet, red appendage as it dances across her flesh as it could dance across mine. My cock leaps.

This will be over somewhat less than impressively if we continue on this exact course.

Halting her next reach for me, I croak out, "Hermione," before clearing my throat to begin again. "Hermione, I am afraid that I will not be able to withstand a great deal of preliminary stimulation this evening."

A flash of comprehension chases the confusion from her face, followed by a genuine smile instead of amusement or derision.

Thank Merlin.

Facing, reclined upon the bed, we meet in a flurry of tongues, lips, and hands. I cradle one breast, caressing the curve of it before fingers move to pinch and stroke the nipple. Her hand grasps my cock, sliding up and down its length, inciting another involuntary spasm of pleasure to run through my body. In order to reciprocate, I relocate my hand to her center, finding her wet and trembling. Her responsiveness ever delightful, she whimpers into our kiss as my fingers tease her clitoris, causing me to moan as well. It is as if we find ourselves caught in a delicious feedback loop of hands and genitalia, lips and sounds.

Yet I break the circuit to venture into new territory, licking my way from lips to breast with a swirl of tongue and a nip of teeth.

She still smells faintly of petitgrain, but it is overwhelmed by the scent of her skin, and I find I prefer this new ratio instead ever more Hermione.

As my tongue first courses across one tightened nipple, she emits a low-pitched sound of want and strains up from the bed, her back a bow. My fingers slide firmly over the slick nub of nerves I have been heretofore teasing, and she arches even higher.

Utterly delightful!

Just as I am about to chuckle in smugness, she clutches my erection in a firmer grip, causing me to hold my breath while the sensation of added pressure washes through me.

Deciding to increase her pleasure to bring it closer to the level I feel my own has obtained, I lave both of her breasts alternately while stroking across the wet flesh of labia, teasing her entrance. She shifts impatiently, attempting to make my finger penetrate, and I laugh lightly. "Not tonight, my dear. Tonight nothing shall be inside of you until my cock has had the privilege."

I am afraid I smirk somewhat as I observe her flush of arousal, her biting of lower lip, her hitched breathing.

Her hand continues to play over me, and my cock is finally moving past its initial extreme sensitivity and into the state where endurance becomes somewhat less of an issue.

As I return attention to her breasts, she says, "Severus."

Continuing my ministrations, I amplify a finger swirl so as to cause her to arch off of the bed again.

"Severus." Her voice sounds pleasantly strained and wanting, so I pause to offer her the chance to speak.

"Don't hold me to this in the future, but you're not the only one who doesn't need a lot of foreplay tonight." Her other hand shifts to cradle my bollocks, rolling them in the heat of her palm and fingers.

The sensation of added tingling combines with the warmth of her hand, and I groan as the feelings merge with those from my cock.

Bloody hell, I want her.

I lower my voice, smirking as I say, "I do hope this does not indicate that I will have to provide another eighteen months worth of such in order to be inside of you again."

"Circe, no!"

"Good."

For I want her for more than this once.

"Because I do not think myself capable of such forbearance a second time." Seriousness gravels my tone.

I retreat from her grasp to shift down the bed as she rearranges herself to rest in a supine position. Elevating her bottom upon a cushion so that I will be certain to stimulate her G-spot more fully, I come to kneel between her parted thighs, delighting in the display she makes: the glistening wetness, the dark pink of blood-swollen flesh. I breathe deeply to take in her scent a scent I have missed these long months, a scent never captured in the Pensieve.

Cock in hand, I run its tip along the crease of her, circling her clitoris before teasing her entrance. Simultaneously, I glory in the feel of her wetness and the warmth I can already feel radiating from her.

"Severus." Her fingers play across my nipples, streaks of sensation adding to that already emanating from the head of my erection.

And I can wait no longer, no matter the build of pleasure such patience brings.

Catching her eyes for I want there to be no doubt of who is with her I push forwards with my hips, head breaching her.

Damn, how exquisite!

I freeze, held by the searing heat of her around my tip contrasting with the relative coolness of the room air on the remainder of my cock.

The differentiation is glorious.

Then she clenches her muscles around me, and I am brought back to the immediacy of the act. Seeing the look of frustrated pleasure on her face, I lower myself to rest upon her, sucking on her tooth-tortured lip, reveling in the feel of her breasts against me, nipples hard and insistent.

My shallow advance forwards is purposefully leisurely, as is the withdrawal. Continuing this routine, I find the extreme tingling focuses entirely on the sensitive head of my cock.

Her legs enfold me, heels pressed into lower back, as her fingers dig into the flesh between my shoulder blades.

Bloody hell!

Feeling her with me, around me, accepting me is heady. Voice rough, I groan her name into her mouth. "Hermione."

I continue this torturous pace for long, timeless moments, pushing ever more deeply into her body with each thrust. Then her hips give a small jerk simultaneously with her cunny clenching tightly around me.

Ah, her G-spot.

Our lips part, allowing me to hear her mewls of pleasure as I continue to stroke across the sensitive flesh. Yet her needy sounds are only part of my reward the increased tightness of her the remainder: she pulses her muscles around me, easing as I move in, clasp as I draw out.

The slowed speed of this rhythm also serves to enhance my pleasure each withdrawal extremely intense, amplifying the drag of the ridge of my head, sending bolts of sensation shooting back to tighten my already tingling sac.

Burying my head in her hair, I breathe her in for a time before turning my attention to placing little kisses across the shell of her ear, the arch of her neck. She turns to me and we kiss, licking and nipping, building urgency.

Merlin, I need more!

I pull back from her enough that she unwraps from me, allowing me to kneel again. Watching the slide of my cock in and out of her cunny, I realize I will not be able to maintain this level of arousal for long. The tingling of my bollocks has expanded past my perineum the feeling of tightening pulling the skin around my anus, adding to the delightful sensations.

Drawing her right hand to my mouth, I suck in her three middle fingers, swirling tongue-drawn dampness across them until they positively drip. I lower her hand towards her center, whispering, "Touch yourself."

At that first swipe of finger across clitoris, she spasms around me, muscles working at my cock until the increase in pressure is almost too titillating.

I groan in tune with her throaty exhalation.

Slowly, old man, ever slowly.

Yet she does not unclench the tightness almost maddening no matter how many times I attempt to school myself to patience.

Hands at her knees, I spread her wide and back, opening her more fully, and she moans approval. The combined sight of her fingers working her nub and my cock sliding in and out of her, disappearing and reappearing in synch with the pressure and heat of her wrapping around me, shoots fire through up my spine.

I am unable to determine who pants more quickly or loudly at this juncture.

As I work myself ever more deeply into her, the pause between withdrawal and penetration becomes ever more exquisite. That small amount of time allows the air to slightly cool my cock so that pushing back in is the heady sensation of diving into heat.

Over and over again, I dive.

Until she shakes under me, legs trembling, cunny clenching in the flutter of orgasmic harbinger.

I look to her face again, capturing her eyes for the length of this slow slide. Finally, I am fully seated within her, my head tapping against a firmness.

Cervix.

Her muscles clasp me so firmly that I feel I can come from that pressure alone, pleasure shooting through my cock and bollocks to linger up my spine.

But she is not quite ready.

Gritting my teeth, I pull back only an inch I can bear no more before returning to the full heat of her. Her grip on my cock sparking energy across the head.

And again I withdraw a short distance before pressing forwards, into her, pressing with a force that I maintain as she crescendos, her cunny spasming rapidly around me, her body arching, voice high and drawn tight, her mouth open in a surprised O, her eyes on mine.

Hermione ...

Beautiful...

I can withhold my own orgasm no longer.

My sac tightens to the point that the pressure of it merges with that of her tightness surrounding my cock, the head adding the most intense tingling sensation. My hips snap forwards one, two, three more times, implanting myself as deeply as possible into her hot wetness. The charge stored in my spine uncoils to shoot energy from my bollocks through my cock in a seemingly timeless, ongoing flow. I groan involuntarily as the rush of sensation crests to leave my entire body tingling, toes and fingers curling, breath stopped, back and legs straining, heart pounding, vision blurring.

All as I strive to maintain eye contact with her.

~~~

My entire body aches pleasantly from exertion, even my cock feeling slightly sore after the night's activities.

I remember waking periodically throughout the early morning unused to the presence of another in the same bed to find us sometimes pressed tightly together, sometimes sprawled further apart, yet always touching, even if only the contact of knee brushing knee, hand against torso.

We now lie with legs entangled, facing, yet upper bodies removed enough that I can observe her countenance in the faint light making its way around the edges of the curtains.

She is lovely, her swollen lips parted in relaxation, her eyelashes fluttering across the tops of her cheeks in dream, her hair a veritable lion's mane around her.

For once, even an internal sneer at the Gryffindor imagery fails me.

*Beautiful. Beautiful and brilliant, and I ...*

Stirring, she gives a faint moue of discomfort as a lock of hair falls across her face.

I reach out and brush it aside, the skin of her cheek soft beneath my fingertips.

Her smile upon waking to see me is glorious, and my heart trips its timing momentarily.

*Thank Merlin, she has no regrets.*

Reaching out to place a hand on my chest, she says a bright, "Good morning."

Lingering remnants of long-held tension uncoil, and I cover her hand with mine. "Yes. Yes, it is."

*AN: A swot to the end, I did research to write this chapter! My thanks go to K, a truly delightful ex-lover who willingly answered my questions about what sex feels like for a man. I hope I did his impressions justice, even though I claim poetic license for the final result.*

*Thank you, everyone, for making this climb with me! I have truly appreciated all of the feedback and will continue to do so. Thanks as well for humoring my experimentation with POV and form.*