

All She Ever Wanted: Money Can't Buy Everything

by debjunk

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, Lilith Kayden, who is held in high regard.

Chapter 1

Hermione sat behind the desk in the book shop, reading. She thought she heard a noise and looked up, but she didn't see anything. The shop was empty at the moment, but she knew it was only a matter of time before the little bell over the door would ring and another patron would enter. She smiled fondly at the stacks of books lined on high shelves. This bookstore was her baby.

The Treasured Word was the name of the store. Hermione had opened it in Diagon Alley five years ago, soon after graduating Hogwarts. The bookstore specialized in rare and out of print books. In fact there wasn't a book in the store that was younger than fifty years old, and she had some that dated back centuries. She even had some that were more than 1000 years old, but those were locked in a cabinet at the side of her desk, only to be touched by those serious in acquiring such a pricy heirloom.

The shop had done well for itself and Hermione wanted for nothing. She had a little side business associated with the shop that kept her happily spanning the globe also. She searched for lost books. Patrons would come to her with the title, author, and description of a book that was rare, out of print, or simply impossible to find, and Hermione would do the impossible and find it for them. Of course, she would be rewarded handsomely for her finds.

She smiled at her last find. The witch who had commissioned her search was so pleased that she had alerted the *Prophet* about the find, and Hermione had found her face plastered on the front page of the newspaper with the headline *Ancient Tome discovered by Hermione Granger*.

She always marveled at how she was a household name now and everyone knew of her. The article had spouted her 'perilous' adventure to find the book, a six hundred year old tome on transfiguration, and had made her look like the Wizarding world's equivalent to Indiana Jones.

She had laughed heartily when she had read it. Truly, the most adventurous thing she had come across was a tarantula in the stacks where the book was located. But of course, the *Prophet* was notorious for its reputation for being accurate in its reporting.

Her current project was much more difficult than the last. It had been giving her headaches for over a month now, and she found herself at a dead end. She reflected on the job and the patron who had commissioned her.

Hermione sat at her desk, reading, when she heard the bell over her door chime. She looked up to see a tall old man with a high black top hat covering his head. He had dress robes on that looked somewhat like a Muggle tuxedo with tails. He also had a walking stick that was made completely of ivory and had an elephant head carved on the top. Hermione smiled at her new visitor, who was regally walking up to her.

"Master Nottingham, how lovely to see you!" she exclaimed to the man who was a regular in her shop.

"Now, Miss Hermione, I have asked you repeatedly to call me Cecil," the old man said with a smile.

"But Master Nottingham, after all you have accomplished in your life, I find it hard not to give you the honor you deserve," she retorted.

"Being a mighty Potions master does not mean that I am any better than you, Miss Hermione. Call me Cecil or I shall take my business elsewhere."

The twinkle in his eye was not missed by Hermione, but she pretended to be flabbergasted anyway.

"I wouldn't want to lose your business, Cecil," she complained with a grin, knowing he would never search anywhere else for his books.

"I have a job for you, my dear," he said as he looked over his glasses at her.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Have you ever heard of the book, The Potions of our Time?" he asked her.

Hermione thought for a minute.

"Isn't that book fictitious? There is no evidence that it has ever really been a book in print."

"Well, my dear, a lot can be lost in one thousand years."

He carefully took a small, old book from his robes and opened it up to the last page.

"I came across this just last week, and my mind has been mulling over the possibilities ever since," Cecil admitted to her.

Hermione took the book and looked at what was written on the last page.

"I owe all that I know to my mentor, teacher, and friend, Horatio Holt, author of The Potions of our Time, a most excellent reference to that which comes simply to our world and that of which is truly a hidden secret to all but the most adept of Potioneers.—Barnaby Sutton, Potions Master and Author."

Hermione glanced up at Cecil.

"Have you ever heard of Horatio Holt?" she asked him.

"No, never," Cecil told her.

"It seems that you have found a wonderful clue, Cecil."

"Can you find the book, Miss Hermione?"

Hermione looked up at Cecil and smiled widely. "I shall give it my all, sir."

He handed her a small bag of Galleons.

"For your retainer," he told her.

She scoffed at him. "Cecil, I need no retainer from you."

"Take it anyway. I would feel better knowing that I have given you something toward your extensive search."

Hermione took the bag reluctantly.

"How long before you want the book, sir?"

"I know these things take time, Miss Hermione. Take as long as you need. I don't think you will come upon this book easily. It will be worth the wait."

Hermione smiled at him as they sealed the deal.

Coming back to reality, Hermione opened the top drawer of her desk and pulled out a copy of the inscription that was found on Cecil's book. She read it over again while shaking her head.

Horatio Holt seemed to never have existed. She had been to every library in England, including the one at the Ministry, and had come up with nothing. How could a great Potions master not have one word written about him anywhere? She had even researched Barnaby Sutton extensively. There was no mention of his relationship with a Horatio Holt in anything she had found. She had come upon a dead end. When this happened in her research, she usually would put the topic aside for a while and eventually she would get an idea on a lead. This had been laid aside for two weeks, but so far, no other ideas had been forthcoming. She replaced the paper back in her desk and got up to inventory the books on Charms. She was so deep in thought that the bell ringing on the door startled her.

She looked up and was surprised to see Ron Weasley enter the shop, followed by an incredibly handsome man.

A/N: Next up: The perfect date?

Here's the prompt: 19. Hermione has made her way rather successfully in the Wizarding World (own business, whatever). She has the clothes, more shoes than Imelda Markos, pretty blonds to give her a foot massage whenever she feels so inclined, and eligible wizards galore on her arm vying for her attention. But Hermione being Hermione wants someone special in her life – someone who is her intellectual equal – and she knows just the wizard. Trouble is, he's living as a recluse (could be at Hogwarts but doesn't have to be) and has shunned the world. How does she manage to get Severus Snape out of his semi-monastic existence and to take an interest in her? (No magical compulsion of any kind allowed). Canon compliant would be good, but not essential.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 2

Hermione's eyes widened at the sight of Ron entering the store.

"Ron! I haven't seen you in over a week! Where have you been?" she gushed as she rushed over to give him a hug.

"Well, there's been a lot of Auror business to attend to," Ron said sheepishly as he hugged her back.

"Hermione," he said after a minute, "I'd like to introduce you to my friend, Pierre Rousseau. He's from France."

Hermione, who had disentangled herself from Ron, extended her hand for a handshake with the man accompanying Ron. She took in his strong features. He was blond, his hair cut short, but with some long bangs in front that swept to his left. He had rugged cheekbones and his face was incredibly chiseled. His eyes were the darkest blue she had ever seen, and they seemed to be looking right through her. He was finely dressed, a dark burgundy dress suit covering his lithe frame.

Pierre took Hermione's hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing it lightly. Hermione was floored by his chivalry.

"Enchanté, Mademoiselle," he said as he looked sultrily into her eyes.

"Oh, I just remembered," Ron broke in. "I need to check out your section on Magical Law Enforcement." He wandered over to the back of the shop.

"How did Ron and you meet up?" Hermione asked Pierre.

"I am an Auror in Paris," he said in a thick French accent. "I 'ave come every other week to train 'ere as a specialist on ex-Death Eaters. It seems we 'ave several running amok in Paris, and our Ministry is bound and determined to track them down and bring them to justice."

Hermione smiled at him. "I hope you catch them. The Death Eaters who managed to escape after the war all disappeared. I'm sure they all fled the country. Unfortunately they are now someone else's headache."

"Of course, I did not accompany my friend to chat about my work."

"Why did you come then, Mister Rousseau?" Hermione asked coyly.

"Ron 'as not stopped speaking about you since we first met. He is bound and determined for us to, 'ow do you say it, get together?"

Hermione laughed. Ron knew she had more than enough attention from the opposite sex, but he still insisted on trying to set her up whenever he could. Of course, his choice this time seemed to be a great one.

"Are you asking me out on a date?" Hermione mused.

"I am," he said with a sly grin.

"Well," she thought about it for half a second. "I'd love to," she gushed.

Pierre grasped her hand again. "Ow is tonight at six o'clock?"

"It sounds lovely."

"Shall I pick you up 'ere?" Pierre asked her.

"I live in the house around the corner. It's number 9. You can pick me up there."

Pierre gave her a smile and bowed slightly.

"How formally would you like me to dress, Mr. Rousseau?"

"You must call me Pierre," he drawled. "Please dress as you would like, I 'ave reservations at a five cauldron restaurant, if that 'elps at all."

Hermione raised her eyebrows, not only because they would be dining so elegantly, but because he had assumed she would agree to his offer.

"You seem quite sure of yourself, Pierre," she mused.

"I was just filled with 'ope, ma chérie," he said slyly.

She smiled at him as Ron wandered up next to them once again.

"Did you find anything?" Hermione asked Ron.

"Nah, nothing that will help right now."

Hermione nodded.

"How's Lavender?" Hermione asked.

Ron and Hermione had dated for a bit after the war, but had decided they worked better as friends. He had resumed his relationship with Lavender, and they had been seeing each other steadily for almost three years now.

"She's fine. She is happy with her new job at Madam Malkin's."

"I should stop in and say hi," Hermione mused, almost to herself.

"She'd like that," Ron said. "We'd best be off. Our lunch break is almost done."

Hermione smiled at the two of them.

Pierre took her hand and kissed it again. She could definitely get used to this kind of treatment.

"I shall see you at six, then, 'Ermione."

"I'll be looking forward to it, Pierre."

oooOOooo

Hermione stared into her huge closet, wondering what she should wear. As she eyed everything, she smiled to herself. Her closet was as big as a small bedroom. The four walls were covered in every style of clothes available. There was a small door in the back of the closet that led to still another closet. This one was entirely filled with shoes. Hermione had done well for herself with her store and her adventures. Looking good was one of her indulgences. Having a nice place to live was another. Her home was bedecked with rich furniture and elaborate wood trimmings. Her eye for finer things had drawn her to some fine artwork. There were beautiful original paintings in each room, mostly by Wizarding artists, but she did enjoy a good Monet and had one displayed prominently in her sitting room. All in all, she was very comfortable with her living arrangements.

She turned back to the dilemma at hand. What to wear. She perused the dresses that copiously filled her closet. Perhaps she should choose a color first? She shook her head. Sometimes having an overabundance of clothing could be a bad thing.

Thinking more about her date, she marveled at the number of men she had seeking her company. Not a week went by when a new suitor had wandered into her shop, struck up a conversation, and had asked her to dinner. She had accepted most of their invitations, as it seemed that mostly good looking men were seeking her attention, but they had all lacked something. Good looks weren't everything, though. Most of these men had nothing upstairs. They could put normal sentences together, but anything deeper left them staring at her blankly, as if she had just arrived from another planet. She sincerely hoped that Pierre was different.

Deciding that green would be the color of the night; she eyed the green dresses she had to choose from. Finally, she chose one with a floor length skirt that had long vertical pleats in it. The color was a light green, almost a mint color. The bodice had short sleeves and a v-neck. There was a silver sash that wrapped itself around the waist of the dress several times, accentuating her curves. She smiled as she wandered over to her shoes. Hermione figured she had more shoes than Imelda Marcos. She smiled to herself as she eyed the hundreds of pairs of shoes that lined the shelves of the room. She finally chose a pair of high heeled silver strapped shoes that would accent her dress nicely. She slipped them on and exited the closet, walking over to a full length mirror that was hung on the open door of the closet. She turned and examined herself. She looked good and she knew it.

Since coming into her own, she had found hair products that made her unruly hair actually look good. She had finally come to appreciate the beautiful curls that surrounded her head, simply because she had discovered how to control them. Her hair surrounded her in graceful curls that fell below her shoulder. She went over to her dresser and opened a drawer. A myriad of hair accessories were thrown in here. She may be well off, but she had never had the time or patience to organize this drawer. She fished around and found a silver headband that had small shimmering flowers on it. She returned to the mirror and placed the headband in her hair, pulling back her curly locks away from her face, and then pushing the headband forward a tiny bit so the front part of her hair was raised slightly. Perfect.

As she primped, she heard a knock at the door. She went over and opened it to find Pierre looking at her appreciatively.

He grasped her hand again and placed yet another kiss on it.

"You look wonderful, 'Ermione," he whispered, apparently mesmerized by her appearance.

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Pierre!"

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She slipped her arm through his. "I am."

Pierre pulled a crumpled soda can from his pocket.

"We will be Portkeying," he told her.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Where are we going?"

"You will see," he said mysteriously.

They appeared in front of a restaurant a few minutes later. Hermione looked around and gave a gasp. The Eiffel Tower rose high above her in the distance, filling her with wonder.

"You brought us to Paris?" she exclaimed.

"I wanted our night to be a special one," Pierre told her.

They turned and Hermione saw the restaurant they were going to dine at. *Le Chaudron D'Or* was written in golden letters across the top of the restaurant. There were tables with umbrellas on the street, and Hermione could see more tables inside the building. Pierre led her into the restaurant and spoke with the Maitre d'. Soon they were being led to a small room in the back. There was a single table for two in a circular room. The walls were made entirely of windows, showing a beautiful view of the city. The table was lit by candlelight.

They were seated and both studied the menu. The waiter came by and took their order. Pierre decided upon the Chateaubriand and Hermione chose the bouillabaisse. They both sat back and began to chat.

Hermione studied Pierre's devilishly good looks as he spoke about his work. He certainly was handsome. She listened as he described every aspect of his work. Their salads had long been eaten, and he was still speaking about himself. Hermione sighed and tried to break in to the conversation, but he just kept on talking, as if she wasn't there.

Their main courses came, and Hermione welcomed the silence that came with their tucking in. After remarking at how wonderful the food was, there wasn't a word. They had been quietly eating for several minutes now. Hermione decided to break the silence and ask Pierre a question.

"So, how do you, as an Auror, counteract the dark spells you sometimes come in contact with?"

Pierre thought for a moment. "We use the Protego spell," he said.

"But don't you find that your enemies expect you to use that and are prepared?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "It 'as never been a problem before."

"I have found that silently casting the repelling jinx counteracts any spell that is shot at me."

"The repelling jinx?" Pierre said.

There it was; the vacant look. Hermione sighed.

"You know, it sounds like what it's supposed to be, *Repello*. When cast silently, it's as if it forms a shield around you and almost any spell bounces right off of you."

"I've never 'eard of that spell or its effects."

Hermione regarded Pierre sadly. "You'll have to try it sometime."

"Yes," he said caustically. "I will."

The evening went downhill from there. It seemed that Pierre didn't like to be one upped by someone of the opposite sex, and Hermione didn't like the fact that Pierre had no interest in anything about her, but only concentrated on his fabulous self. No wonder he had made the reservations for tonight ahead of time. He thought so much of himself that it probably never occurred to him that she might have turned him down. When they had finished their dinner, they took the Portkey back to her home and bid each other goodnight.

As Hermione closed the door behind her, she reflected upon her night. It had been yet another abysmal failure of a date. She knew good looks weren't everything, but the last few months of dating had been utterly ridiculous.

A/N: Next up: Weighing her options

Thanks to all of you who gave this a peek. I appreciate you reading, and to those who left a review, a special thanks.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 17

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Chapter 3

Hermione sat in her sunroom in a recliner, her feet bare and resting over a towel. This was her favorite room. It was rectangular and had windows bordered with rich mahogany wood. They spanned the three walls of the room which jutted out from the rest of the house. The ceiling was made of glass. Hermione had gone to great lengths to have it installed. It was one of her indulgences since becoming financially independent.

As she reclined, Hermione studied the bright blue sky above her. It had a few fluffy cumulus clouds floating across it. The day looked cheerful and bright.

A voice brought her out of her thoughts. "Miss Granger, what color would you prefer today?"

Hermione craned her neck to look at her pedicurist. His bleached blond hair fell to his shoulders usually, but today he had it tied behind him in a pony tail. He smiled at her as he awaited her answer.

"How about blood red?" she asked.

Her mood was dark and other than black, that was the only color that had any appeal to her at this time. She really didn't want black toenails for the week.

"Very well, Miss Granger," Jonathan said as he reached for the desired color.

Hermione lay back again and stared at the ceiling, thinking of her visit to Cecil Nottingham that morning. She had waited for him in his study at his home. He had entered dressed much the same way he had on the day he had visited her, minus the top hat. Turning, she had given him a wide grin.

"Good Morning, Cecil," she said.

"Ah, Miss Granger, it is wonderful to see you! Do you have any news on the book?"

Hermione frowned.

"Cecil, if I am to address you by your first name, you must do the same for me."

Cecil gave her a small bow. "Of course, Hermione. Have you found the book already?"

"No, I'm sorry, Cecil. I came by to tell you that I've practically reached a dead end. I was wondering if you had come across anything else yourself."

Cecil shook his head solemnly. "No, I'm sorry; I gave you everything I have."

Hermione looked at Cecil sadly. "Sir, I'm not sure if I can solve this one."

Cecil came closer to her and laid his hand on her arm comfortingly. "Now, now, Hermione, I have the utmost faith in you. You have never let me down before. It has only been a little over a month that you have been searching. Give yourself a break. I told you there was no hurry."

"I know, Cecil, but I'm not used to failing my best clients, sir."

Cecil smiled at her benevolently. "You have not failed, Hermione. We don't even know if the book truly exists. Yes, Barnaby Sutton has mentioned it, but it may have well been destroyed since then."

Hermione nodded slightly and gave Cecil a small smile.

"Please keep at it. I don't care if it takes you years to find it, as long as I'm still alive, of course," he said with a large grin.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at his jest. "Alright, sir," she acquiesced. "I just wanted you to know that I have been working on it. I'll just need more time."

"Hermione, if anyone can find it, it's you."

Hermione's memory dissolved and she came back to the present. Her meeting with Cecil had been pleasant enough, but she had hated to make such a report to him. She had felt like an utter failure for not even having a small lead on the book. Cecil Nottingham had been incredibly understanding, but she was being paid for results, not apologies.

She looked up at her pedicurist as he began to apply the blood red polish to her now perfect toes. Regular pedicures were yet another indulgence she allowed herself. Since her bookstore and book hunts had gone so well, Hermione lacked for nothing. Having money certainly had its advantages. If she wanted something, she never needed to wait. But most of her indulgences were physical ones. A great pedicure, a nice house, a beautiful wardrobe, these were the things she indulged in. However, she would give it all up for the love of a good man.

That brought her back to her foul mood. Not only had she been upset with her conversation with Cecil, there was also the fiasco of her date gone wrong the night before. She was at her wit's end. In the last two years, she must have dated every available bachelor in London, but no one had struck her fancy.

At first she had simply enjoyed the attention, but now she longed for something more. Good looks were one thing, but she wanted someone she could talk to on her level. That had been the problem with Ron when they had been dating. She loved him dearly, but she had constantly had to dumb herself down for him. He was a wonderful man, but their differences in intellect had just been too great for Hermione. Having imagined herself using a limited vocabulary and having to explain obvious details about her work for the rest of her life had proven to her that Ron was just not right for her. They had amicably ended their relationship and, luckily, had remained good friends.

Ultimately, she longed for the kind of man who would sit in front of the fire and discuss his favorite book, or the latest developments in Potions, or the new Charm that had been discovered just last week.

She knew of no one who held such interests. Well, almost no one. She knew of one person, but he was unattainable. She knew in her heart that Severus Snape could keep her interest and they would have no problem understanding one another. She sighed. Snape had all but disappeared since the war. She had secretly found out where he lived a long time ago. This odd desire to be with him had been going on for quite a while now. She'd had an unhealthy attraction to him ever since the end of the war.

Immediately following the war, Snape had resigned from Hogwarts and, few knew of this, had bought a cottage north of Hogsmeade. It was at the end of a remote road that no one had ever thought to travel. Through Hermione's connections at the Ministry and her experience with her job, she had located the bill of sale and had done some detective work.

After some careful scrutiny, Hermione had found out that Severus never left his home. He'd had everything sent in by Portkey or owl. He had silently disappeared from the Wizarding world, and it seemed that she was the only one who had noticed.

She had casually brought up the subject to Harry and Ron, but they really hadn't cared where Snape was. They were happy that he had survived Nagini's attack, they were relieved that he had been secretly on their side all along. In the end, however, neither one had had any interest in kindling a friendship with the dour man who had made their school years horrible.

She mulled over Severus' apparent rise from the dead. Unbeknownst to any of them, he had suspected that he might be poisoned by the giant snake and had been taking antivenin for a year. He had swallowed a Blood-Replenishing Potion before the battle had truly begun. Immediately after Nagini's attack, he had somehow downed another dose of the antivenin before the Golden Trio had even emerged from the tunnel. In all of the confusion, the discarded vial had never been seen by any of the three of them.

So even though Severus had passed out in a pool of his own blood, having been believed dead by Harry Potter and his two friends, he had ultimately been able to survive. When he'd come to, he had struggled to fish a strengthening solution out of his pocket. He'd barely been able to uncork it. After taking it, he'd had enough energy to stagger back to Hogwarts through the tunnel from the Shrieking Shack. The strengthening solution had been able to sustain him for a little while, and he eventually had stumbled into the Great Hall long after the battle had been won.

Of course, with all of the death and destruction, the Hall had still been filled with battle weary. Severus had braced himself against the door before he'd fallen to the ground while the entire population in the Great Hall had stared at him, in dumbfounded silence.

Thank heaven for Poppy Pomfrey. She had kept her wits about her and had rushed to his side. She had conscientiously helped to heal the gashes in his neck as he had lain on the floor, unconscious.

Ultimately, his injuries had only kept him in bed for a day or two. The antivenin had certainly done its work and he had healed quickly. Thanks to Poppy's quick attention, his neck had only had a few small lines of scarring from the huge bite that the evil snake had taken out of the side of it. All in all, it had been a miracle. A miracle mostly of Snape's doing, but a miracle nonetheless.

As soon as Snape had been able to leave the infirmary, he had marched up to Minerva's office and had turned in his resignation. Minerva had tried to convince him to stay, but he would have none of it. Hermione had secretly thought that he could not look at the faces of all of those who had hated him for so long, never knowing if they truly believed him or whether they were just following the crowd and the articles in the newspapers. He had never been seen by the Wizarding world again.

Yes, Severus Snape had disappeared, and no one had cared. No one but Hermione, that was. She had always admired him. She had struggled when he had killed Dumbledore, but even then she'd had a nagging suspicion that all was not as it had seemed. Of course, she never could have said anything like that to Ron or Harry. She would have been dragged to St. Mungo's, and she had needed to be there with her boys to help them out in the search for Horcruxes.

In any case, although she had known Severus had killed, she had not been able to wrap his duplicity around her mind. She had felt that someday they would know the truth and that Severus Snape would not turn out to be the evil person everyone thought he had been. She had known Snape was devious, but Dumbledore had had so much trust in him that she couldn't help but wonder what the truth really was.

Also, from Hermione's perspective, he had always seemed to be loyal. While staying at Grimmauld Place, she had gotten to know him a bit better than her friends had. She had always been a night owl and had loved to sit in the study, reading until the wee hours of the night. Most nights, Severus had been there too. That's when she had taken to calling him Severus for that matter. Well, she had been calling him that in her mind, at least, since then. She had known he would have scowled and bitten her head off had his first name ever come out of her mouth while she was still his student. She smiled to herself thinking of those days long gone.

He had always frowned when he had seen her in the study, but her presence had never sent him looking for another place to read. Hermione had suspected that he had spent his evenings at Grimmauld Place simply because he had not wanted to spend them wherever it was he had spent his summers as a teacher. Later on, after the war, she had discovered Spinner's End in her search for Snape. She had not been surprised to find him nowhere near the old run down home and had been even less surprised about that summer of quiet study.

Severus and she had usually sat quietly, not really ignoring each other, but in companionable silence, if it could have been called that with Severus Snape. Sometimes she had come across something that she had been reading that puzzled her. She had usually asked him about it. He usually had huffed at her and explained it and then the two of them would go back to their individual study.

She really couldn't describe these sessions as friendly, but they certainly hadn't been hostile, and Hermione had grown to know a different side of Severus Snape. She had learned about the quiet, contemplative man that he was. She had seen him when he wasn't barking orders, or screaming insults, and she had thought that deep down, Severus Snape was a person that no one really knew. She had always wanted to get to know him better.

Coming back to the present, she realized that she wanted to get to know him better even more now. Having dated the entire population of Britain, she could assure herself that no one would be a better companion to her than Severus Snape. If only she could convince him of that.

She smiled to herself, thinking of the reaction she would get if she suddenly showed up at his doorstep.

"Hey, Sevvie, how's everything going?"

She was sure he would hex her back to her house so fast that she wouldn't know which way was up.

No, she needed a plan . . . a good plan . . . a plan that he would not see as desperation or pity. Merlin, she knew he hated being pitied. She definitely would rue the day he thought she pitied him.

The thing was that she didn't pity him. She felt compassionate about his situation, but was well aware that he had first gotten himself involved with the Death Eaters of his own free will. Then, when he had decided to turn on them, he had made the decision to work for the good cause until the very end. If anything, she admired him. She knew a lesser man would have run and hidden from such a horrible existence, but he never had.

But what could she do to entice him to spend time with her? He would scoff if she just showed up on his doorstep. She needed a good reason to be there, a reason to ask him to spend time with her.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place, and she knew exactly what she would do. She would seek out his help in finding the Potions text that Cecil had commissioned her to find. It would accomplish two tasks at once. She could use another pair of eyes and a sharp mind on this search. None of her other searches had vexed her so much. His experience as a Potions master would be immensely helpful, and perhaps, being a Potions master, he might even know something more about Horatio Holt and his tome.

She smiled to herself as she plotted how she would go about winning Severus Snape's heart. She just hoped that he wasn't so far gone, separated from everyone and everything, that he would allow her into his secluded world.

A/N: Next up: Hermione seeks out Severus.

Ah, the fun begins. Will Severus help her or will he choose to remain secluded in his little sanctuary? Only an update and a huge amount of snark can give us the answers. Thank you all for reading and reviewing. Many thanks to my beta, who will have to wait to bask in her glory until after the challenge has ended.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 4

The next day, Hermione closed the book shop early. Gathering everything she would need to convince Snape to help her, she Apparated to a clearing near his cottage. She eyed the white home with the red shingled roof. If she already hadn't been here once before, she would be sure she was mistaken about this being his home. She braced herself for the onslaught that she knew was to come and went up the pathway to the door. Lifting her fist, she rapped on the door three times and awaited a response. Of course there was none.

She knocked again. There was no answer. Hermione rolled her eyes. She knew he had to be in there, he never left! She decided to walk around the house. Perhaps he was in the back yard or something. As she made her way around the home, she noticed that every window had the curtains shut tight. She wondered if they were always like that, or had he magically closed them at her first rap on the door. Coming to the back yard, she stopped and looked over a chest high white picket fence. She smirked at the thought of Severus Snape living in a home with a picket fence. She walked around the exterior of the fence and peered into the back yard.

It was immaculately cared for. There was some green grass on the front part of the yard closest to her. The back half of the yard was filled with plants of all kind. She recognized many of them as things Severus would use for potion ingredients, but there was also a large flower bed. In the center was a large oval of the blackest tulips she had ever seen. They were hauntingly beautiful, a dark purple color, actually. Surrounding the tulips in another oval was a thinner group of daffodils. She smiled at the flowers. They truly looked stunning.

By now she had rounded to the other side of the yard. Sure that Severus was not hiding in the garden, she went back to the front door and began the long process of knocking. Perhaps she should have owled ahead. That of course, would have given him the opportunity to really hide, so of course, that had been out of the question.

After fifteen minutes of her knocking and waiting the door was thrown open, and a most irate Severus Snape glowered at her.

"For heaven's sake, woman! Can't you take a hint?" he bellowed at her.

Now this sort of behavior would have had Hermione cowering in a corner as a student, but his barking only made her smile now. He was so utterly predictable.

"Master Snape, I'm glad I found you at home," Hermione said with a broad grin on her face.

"Where else would I be, you daft woman? Why have you decided to beat down my door?"

"Now, now, I hardly beat down your door, Master Snape. I am here to ask your help with something, actually."

Severus' eyes narrowed at her. "How did you find me?"

"I have my sources, sir."

"No one knows where I live!" he said through gritted teeth.

"I beg to differ, sir. I know where you live."

Severus looked gobsmacked. Hermione was really enjoying herself. Perhaps for the first time in years.

"As I said before, sir, I need your help. Would it be okay if I came in, just for a few minutes, to explain why I have sought you out today?"

Severus looked Hermione up and down, noticing the small book she held in her hand. She was dressed impeccably in business robes that were dark green. Her hair was not the bush he remembered, but it flowed around her in luxurious curls. Her brown eyes were big, trying to look innocent, yet they seemed to know more about the world than her years belied.

His first inclination was to slam the door in her face. Of course, if he did that, the insufferable woman would continue to rap at it until he had no choice but to listen to her. Hermione Granger was just that stubborn. He supposed he could spare a couple minutes of his incredibly busy day of reading and brewing to listen to her so he could send her on her way, never to be seen again.

Frowning deeply, so she would know just how annoyed he was, he stepped back and let her come in to his home.

Hermione's smile grew wider as he stepped back and she walked past him. The interior of the cottage was unexpected to her. It was filled with log furniture. The whole thing looked like a room at the lodges she and her parents had stayed at when they went skiing. There was a log couch with maroon cushions. A matching seat and an ottoman sat on either end of the couch. Of course there was a fireplace. The couch was situated in front of it. The fireplace mantle was made up of the same pale wood that made up the furniture. Farther back was a wooden table and chairs in the same wood color and chunky style.

She turned back to Severus after she had glanced around.

"This is really lovely, sir," she complimented.

Severus only scowled and led the way back to the table. He motioned for her to take a seat, which she did, setting her book on the table in front of her.

"Thank you for taking time to see me, sir," Hermione began.

"Just get on with it!"

Hermione flinched at his sharpness, but kept her demeanor light.

"Alright," she said. "I own a bookstore in Diagon Alley."

"Yes, yes, *The Treasured Word*. I know all about it."

Hermione gave him a look of shock. She hadn't been sure whether he even kept up with the outside world, and for him to know of her little, insignificant shop half a country away was quite surprising.

"Don't look so shocked, Miss Granger. I do read the paper, and your face is often plastered on the cover. What was that last book you dug up?"

"*Transfiguration in a Transfigured World*," she offered.

Severus nodded. "It seems that you are quite the adventurer, Miss Granger," he said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, please, you know never to believe what you read in *The Prophet*. They made me sound like someone out of an adventure novel, fighting off dangerous animals to find a simple book." She laughed. "I assure you, the actual search was much more mundane."

"Your question, Miss Granger?" Severus said in a bored tone.

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm sorry to have gotten sidetracked. Actually, your knowledge of my work will help considerably. I have been commissioned to find another book. This one is on Potions. I have been searching for over a month with no success." Hermione heaved a great sigh and barreled into her request. "Sir, would you consider helping me find it?"

Severus laughed. Hermione arched an eyebrow at him as she watched him throw his head back and guffaw at her. She knew this was the first time she had ever heard Severus Snape laugh. She didn't take it as a good sign.

"You want me," he pointed to himself and snorted, "to help you," he pointed his finger at her.

She gave him a wan smile. "I would be really grateful if you could?" she said sheepishly.

More laughter assaulted her. Hermione rolled her eyes. She would have to throw in something more enticing.

"It's *The Potions of our Time*, sir."

Severus immediately stopped laughing. "I beg your pardon?" he asked dubiously.

"I said it's *The Potions of our Time*."

Severus scoffed. "That book is just a fairy tale. Every Potions Master tells his apprentice about a book of potions so complete, that you would never need another book of Potions again. It's just a legend. Wishful thinking," he offered with a flourish of his hand.

Hermione opened her book and took out the copy of the post script from Barnaby Sutton and pushed it across the table to Severus. Severus picked it up and read it quickly. He looked back up at Hermione with a more serious expression on his face.

"Do you know what this find would mean to our world?" he asked in a hushed tone.

"I do, sir, that's why I need your help. I have already scoured every library I could find, looking for references to Holt. I have searched Sutton extensively, but this one document is the only mention of his even knowing Holt. I am at a dead end, sir. I could use a new pair of eyes."

"Who are you working for?" Severus asked suddenly.

"Cecil Nottingham," she told him.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "He's still alive?"

"Apparently, as he walked into my shop over a month ago with the book this passage was taken from."

"Don't be smart with me, witch."

Hermione wanted to make a caustic remark, but she needed this to work. She looked duly repentant.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to be flip."

Severus gave her a quick nod and stared down at the paper again. His mind was already creating ways to track down the book. He felt himself get excited. But then, he reigned himself in. When he had disappeared from the Wizarding world, he had no intention of ever emerging back into it. If he helped Granger, word would get out that he was out and about. People would start looking for him. His carefully constructed life would be . . . disturbed. He didn't like the sound of that at all.

No, it would be better if he left this matter alone. Let Granger figure it out on her own. She knew everything anyway. What could he really contribute? Making his decision, he looked back up at Hermione.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger, I cannot help you."

"But, sir, with the both of us . . ."

"I said I couldn't help you. That is my final answer. Thank you for stopping by, now please take your possessions and leave!"

"But . . ."

"And don't come back!"

Hermione looked to the table. She was almost in tears. She had been so sure his interest would be peaked with her explanation. She had been foolish to think that he would drop everything just to help her. She stood and reached for the paper, which Severus was holding out to her. She opened her book and placed it back into it, extracting another piece of paper and handing it to him.

"I will not bother you again, sir, but if you change your mind, this is my address. Please come find me. I really could use your help."

With that she turned and showed herself out of the cottage, Apparating away with a pop. Severus stared after her, and then looked down at the paper. He should just toss it into the trash, but something made him get up and take it into his bedroom. He put it in the drawer of his desk, with the intention to never look at it again.

oooOOOooo

A week had gone by, and he hadn't pulled out the paper with Hermione's address on it. Unfortunately, every waking minute of every day had been filled with thoughts of the search for the text. What he wouldn't give to lay his hands on that book! No, it was foolishness. He couldn't, he wouldn't go after it. He wouldn't disturb his life in such a way.

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Another week had passed, with still not a glance at the paper. But his resolve was weakening. What would it hurt for him to be seen sporadically in the Wizarding world? What would the harm be if someone, other than Miss Granger of course, knew that he still lurked about? The adventure would far outweigh the negatives, he was now sure. He couldn't even be sure that he would be recognized. He could, of course, wear something other than the black robes he had grown so fond of. He assumed no one would give him a second glance if they saw him in say, green, or blue. Maybe he wouldn't be noticed at all.

He went into his bedroom and opened the desk drawer. Looking down into it, he stared at the paper with Granger's address on it for at least five minutes. Finally he heaved a great sigh. That know-it-all Granger had dangled a carrot in front of his nose that he couldn't ignore. He shook his head and pulled the paper from its place in the drawer. He went over to his bookshelf and pulled a fat book from it. He placed the book and the address on his bed as he went to his closet and pulled out a green robe, similar to his black ones. Despite his love for black, he had some other color choices in his wardrobe. He just liked black better.

Pulling off his black robes, he put the green ones on with the black pants he already wore. Looking in the mirror, he admitted that dark green wasn't a bad color on him. Shaking his head, he gathered the book and address and did something he hadn't done in quite a while. He left his home and Apparated to London.

A/N: Next up: Severus' book's significance.

Many thanks to my beta, who works under a shroud of secrecy. Thank you all for your wonderful reviews. Please leave one if you haven't already, and keep it up if you already have.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 5

Hermione entered her home and dropped a small pile of books on the table at the door. She exhaustedly hung her cloak on the hook behind the door. It had been a long day, and the only thing she could concentrate on was a bath. She quickly moved through the house into her bedroom and back through it to the bathroom. She looked at her huge tub and smiled. Yet another indulgence sat before her. It was a tub fit for a queen. She could probably entertain five people in it if she wanted to, but she coveted her enormous tub and would share it with no one. It was jettied of course; just what she needed to relax after a long day of stocking and rearranging shelves. Dropping her wand absently on the sink counter so it would be in reach, she watched it as it spun slightly, coming to rest at a diagonal. Boy was she tired! She had been mesmerized by the slight turning of the wand and now she sat and stared at it blankly. Shaking her head and giving a small sigh, Hermione turned the tap water on and let the tub fill as she stripped down to her underwear.

She had been sitting on the edge of the tub watching it fill and thinking about nothing when there was a knock at her door. She frowned, wondering who could be bothering her. Grabbing a robe, she pulled it around her and tied it tightly. She turned off the tap water before answering the door. Opening it, she was amazed to see Severus Snape standing there, looking out of place.

"Oh," he said in embarrassment as he saw her state of undress, "you're busy. I'll come back later."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Nonsense, Severus!"

She grabbed his arm and pulled him inside.

"I'm not going to let you escape me that easily!" Hermione cried. "Make yourself at home while I go put some clothes on," she ordered as she disappeared into her bedroom.

Severus heaved a sigh, not liking his thoughts when she had appeared at her door in only a robe. *You've been a recluse too long, Severus Snape, if the thought of a scantily clad Hermione Granger can excite you.* He rolled his eyes at his waywardness. Looking around her home, he found it to be cozy and elegant. The living room had a dark tan rug covering the floor. Two white couches faced each other in front of a fire place. A dark wood and glass coffee table sat in between the two sofas. Off to the right was a Muggle haven of electronics. There was a huge flat screen TV hooked up to a stereo system. There was also a number of Muggle CDs and DVDs to choose from. Severus wandered over and perused her musical selections. Smirking to himself he chose one and put it into the CD player.

Hermione hurried and dressed in a pair of white slacks with a turquoise short sleeve top. Glancing in the mirror, she straightened out her hair and fixed her makeup quickly before she emerged to speak with Severus.

As she reentered the living room, she found him straightening up, having just inserted a CD into the stereo.

"What did you choose for us?" she asked.

"Mozart," Severus said simply.

"Oh, he's my favorite! I love the Fortieth Symphony."

Hermione stopped in her tracks as the sounds of the Mozart Requiem began to play. She smirked at him.

"That's not quite as upbeat as the Fortieth," she joked.

"A mass for the dead shouldn't be upbeat."

Hermione tilted her head and regarded Severus carefully. "No, I suppose it shouldn't be. Nonetheless, this is another of my favorites. I actually like to sing along with it."

Severus raised his eyebrow at her.

"Do you like to sing, sir?"

Severus scowled. "No, I do not like to sing."

"That's a pity. I assumed that with your wonderful speaking voice you would be a wonderful singer as well."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her, but ignored her comment.

"Please, sir, sit down," Hermione said, motioning to one of the couches.

She sat on the couch across from him and folded her hands around her knees, waiting for him to speak.

"I have decided to agree to your request for help."

Hermione smiled. Her heart was racing a mile a minute, but she made herself be very nonchalant. "Thank you, sir."

"I think that since we will be working closely together, perhaps we should address each other by our first names," Severus said blandly.

"Alright, Severus."

"Most people are unaware of this, but prior to my mother, the Prince line had many Potions masters associated with it."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "So you're not the first in your family to become a Potions master?"

Severus looked at her crossly. "If we are to work together, Miss Granger, I would expect you to listen to what I have to say before piping in with a million questions!"

Hermione looked duly chastised. "I'm sorry, sir, I just like to make sure I understand things, so I have a habit of rephrasing them. It won't happen again."

Severus looked appeased. He went on.

"The Potions masters that have existed in my line span back more than a thousand years. My mother and the women before her were careful to keep the record of our ancestors intact and updated. I have a family history that reaches almost as far back as the first Potions master in history."

Hermione's mouth dropped open, imagining what work it must have taken to accumulate all of that information.

"To get to the point, Hermione, I am a direct descendent of Barnaby Sutton." He pulled the book from his robes and placed it on the table.

"This," he said with a flourish of his hand, "is his personal diary."

Hermione could not contain her excitement. "Oh, Severus, thank you for helping me!"

She got up and sat next to him on the sofa. "May I touch it?" she asked.

He nodded his agreement. She pulled the book to her and felt the dry cracked leather. The book was brown in color, and although small, measuring approximately three inches by five inches, it was very thick. It was an enchanted diary. It would expand as the author wrote into it, making more room for subsequent entries.

"Have you found anything in it?" Hermione asked him.

"I have not read it carefully for a long time. I have skimmed through it quickly in preparation for our meeting. Sutton mentions Horatio Holt repeatedly, but if he had mentioned the book, I have not come across it, nor do I remember reading about it previously."

Hermione cracked the book open and lovingly stroked the first page. "Severus, this is a gold mine. Not just for our search, but it holds long lost secrets about your family."

"He started it when he was at Hogwarts," Severus explained. "He was in the second class of the school. He begins talking about Holt and his apprenticeship about a quarter of the way into the diary. I marked the spot with a bookmark."

Hermione turned to the bookmark, a Slytherin snake that was clipped over the page. She carefully removed it and read the entry. Severus scooted closer to her and read it

over her shoulder. Finally she looked over to him.

"This states that Holt was already an author. Do you think he had written *Potions for our Time* yet, or was Sutton referring to some other book he may have written?"

"I honestly don't know," Severus said as he eyed the entry again curiously.

Hermione took her wand and waved it over the book, making a copy of the entry.

"We'll need to copy anything that seems pertinent for now. We can sort them out and be more in-depth with them later. The copies will help to prevent excessive wear and tear on the diary."

They spent the next two hours scanning each entry quickly, looking for references to Horatio Holt. Some of the entries were very short, but most of them were quite long. It seemed that Barnaby Sutton was a man of many words. He had amassed hundreds of pages of memoirs in the diary. It would take them a while just to glance through everything and compile copies to search. They copied out anything that seemed even the least bit pertinent. Finally, Hermione sat back in the sofa and rubbed her neck.

"I can't read another word," she mused. "Everything is jumbled on the page to me now."

"I think it's time we gave up for the evening," Severus said quietly.

He placed the bookmark on the page where they'd left off and turned to Hermione.

"When do you want to meet again?" he asked her.

"Tomorrow, if you can."

"I am available."

Hermione wanted to smirk, but things had been going nicely the past two hours and she didn't want to spoil it by making him irate.

"I can meet at your home if that's easier, Severus. My shop is open until three tomorrow. I can drop by after that."

"That would be agreeable," he said as he rose.

Hermione got up also and walked him to the door.

"Severus?"

Severus turned in the archway and gave her a raised eyebrow.

"Thank you again for helping me. I would have never been able to get my hands on such an in-depth resource."

Severus gave her a slight nod of the head, said good night, and left. Hermione closed the door behind him and leaned against it. She gave an excited squeal when she was sure that he was gone. She had hoped he would reconsider about helping her, but being the stubborn man that she knew he was, she had not counted on it. Luckily she had been wrong, and he had reconsidered.

She had become very negative about ever being able to find the ancient text, but now her enthusiasm was renewed. With Severus' help, she was sure she could uncover the whereabouts of the book. She only hoped that she could break through the walls that he had built around Severus' feelings and get him to like her.

A/N: Next up: Another quest.

Yes, I really do enjoy singing the Mozart Requiem. It's an amazing piece. Kudos to my beta, she knows I appreciate her. Thank you all for your interest and fun reviews. I enjoy hearing from all of you.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 6

Severus stood outside of Hermione's bookstore the next day. He shook his head. He had Apparated to London two days in a row. His life was becoming a circus. He reached for the door and opened it as a small bell rang to announce his presence.

Hermione looked up to see a tall man enter the shop. She was surprised to recognize Severus Snape entering her little bookstore, fully incognito. He had on sunglasses and his black hair was tied behind his neck. He wore dark grey pants and a navy blue shirt. Hermione gave him a quick smile.

"Good morning, Severus. I thought we were going to meet later on today," Hermione gushed nervously as Severus approached the counter.

"I have a personal request, Hermione, that I didn't want to interfere with our search later," Severus said darkly.

Hermione looked at him expectantly.

"Hermione, have you ever heard of the book *Incantations for Potions*?" he asked finally.

Hermione's eyebrows knit together as she considered Severus' inquiry.

"The title sounds familiar, but I can't place it."

"Ages ago, Potioneers would combine wand work with their potions. *Incantations for Potions* is a book that was written about five hundred years ago. It's supposed to have detailed instructions on how to combine spells and potions."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this. "Do you have the book in your possession?" she asked Severus.

"I do not. I want you to find it for me."

Hermione sat back in her chair and folded her arms, deep in thought. "I could do some searching at the Ministry for you if you'd like."

Severus nodded. "It's probably nothing worthwhile. I sincerely doubt there is much to the theory. It's probably just a book of foolish wand waving."

He looked up suddenly, as Hermione had said the last three words in unison with him. He frowned at her. How could she know he was going to say such a thing? Hermione blushed crimson at his glare.

"*Nonetheless*," he went on, "I would be interested to see if there is any credence to the subject. I have found that much of the old ways of doing things have been lost in our time."

Hermione nodded in agreement.

"What is your price for such a search?" Severus asked her.

Hermione scoffed. "Severus, you can consider it payment for helping me with *Potions of our Time*. I would be glad to do anything you ask for your help."

Severus scowled. "Hermione, I can pay you whatever your fee is."

"Nonsense, it will be my pleasure to help you find it, if it still exists. One thing I do tell all of my clients is that it's highly likely that books that are older than three hundred years have been destroyed. But if it still exists, I will find it."

Severus looked at her for a while, debating whether to take her offer or not. Finally, he nodded his agreement, and he left her shop without another word to her.

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That night had been productive. They had gone through a small part of the diary where almost every page had needed to be copied for further study. The next evening, they had gathered once again at Severus' cottage. They were going to tackle the next part of the diary. The book was incredibly extensive. It seemed to go on forever. Hermione knew it would take them many days just to get through the entire book. But her mind wasn't on the diary just yet. She had some news for Severus. Hermione looked at Severus excitedly before they began.

"I found a reference to *Incantations for Potions* today at the Ministry Library!" she said animatedly.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her.

"I wasn't expecting you to find anything so quickly."

Hermione gave him a smile. "Some things are easier to find than others," she divulged.

"That may be, but I'm sure the fact that you are very good at what you do might have had something to do with it," Severus said dryly.

"Did you just pay me a compliment?" Hermione asked in shock.

The slightest tilt of the left side of Severus' mouth was the only answer to her. Hermione thought that was a smirk, but even her keen eye had to question whether she had seen anything at all. She decided to plod on with what she had found.

"There's a record of the book being located in the Wizarding section of the University of Leeds Library."

"There's a Wizarding section at the University of Leeds Library?"

"Oh, yes. Haven't you been there?"

"I am a recluse, remember?" Severus answered sarcastically.

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "I realize that, but you weren't *always* a recluse."

"I have never had the privilege to visit Leeds for any reason, let alone to explore an unknown library."

"Well, it's small," Hermione admitted, "but it has a nice collection of Wizarding literature. I was planning on heading up there tomorrow."

Hermione sat deep in thought for a moment. She looked over at Severus eagerly.

"You should come with me!"

"Hermione, I will not."

"Why not?"

"What if I'm seen?" he growled.

"We are going to Leeds, not downtown London, for heaven's sake. We can Apparate from here directly to the outside of the library. You'll be seen by maybe two or three people in total, none of which will be wizards in all probability. Even if there is a witch or wizard in the library, they probably will have never heard of you."

"I thought everyone had heard of me," Severus said snidely. "I'm a household name."

"Okay, maybe they'll have heard of you, but most wouldn't recognize you from Batman."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her bat reference.

"Oh, lighten up; he's a bloody Muggle movie character, for Merlin's sake."

"I am aware of the identity of Batman, Hermione," Severus said caustically.

"Well, then you'll understand the reference," Hermione said in a clipped tone.

"I also understand the underlying reference to my former teaching appearance."

"Whatever are you talking about?" Hermione asked innocently.

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about."

"Severus, to be honest with you, *that* reference didn't cross my mind until you brought it up!"

"Of course it didn't," Severus huffed.

Hermione decided to let the Batman matter drop. "Come on, Severus, come with me. We can search more efficiently if there are two of us!"

Severus mulled it over, all the while scowling at her. He found it hard to believe that she hadn't thought of the Bat of the Dungeons reference, as she had said. Who wouldn't? It was his alter ego after all. But she had seemed sincere, and he had no real reason to doubt her. He decided to let that matter drop.

But what about accompanying her? Maybe she was right, and no one would recognize him. What if she was wrong, though? He didn't want all of the papers plastered with his name. *Snape appears in Leeds!* He could just see them now. They would probably make all sorts of accusations. They would no doubt accuse him of going to Leeds to kill someone or to get potions ingredients for some sordid potion that would poison the world.

Severus shook his head. He was jumping to conclusions. He supposed that was part of being a recluse, one became paranoid. Being a spy for most of his life certainly didn't help either. Hermione was right and he was being foolish. In all probability, no one would see him, and if they did, why would they recognize him, especially if he didn't look like himself? He finally came to a decision.

"Alright, but we will go right there and come right back. No walking in the square, no window shopping sprees. Just there and back," he ordered.

"Why would I want to go window shopping in Leeds? All of the designer shops are right here in London. Everyone knows if you don't get your clothes here, there's no reason to even wear them," Hermione said flatly with a roll of her eyes.

Severus looked at her incredulously. He knew she had fine taste in clothes, but he had no idea she was so vain.

Hermione saw the look on Severus' face and burst out laughing. "I had you going there for a minute, didn't I?"

Severus huffed and turned back to the diary, trying to ignore the giggling going on beside him.

"Severus, I may have a great interest in nice clothes, but I'm not obsessed with buying them, and I don't window shop wherever I go, you insolent git."

Severus kept his eyes on the diary, waiting for the chit of a woman to stop laughing at him. He had never met anyone so infuriating in his life.

A/N: Next up: The hunt for Severus' book.

So they're getting sidetracked, but they're still spending time with one another, right? Mega kudos to my secret beta. You are greatly appreciated.

Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 7

The next day, Hermione Apparated to Severus' cottage. Severus awaited her inside. He wore the same sunglasses he had worn the other day, but today he had chosen black pants once again, and a dark maroon robe for his outfit. He would never admit it, but he didn't mind dressing in something other than black for a change. It was a small diversion from his very mundane life, but a welcome one. He shook his head to clear his thoughts as there was a knock on the door. He opened it and looked down appreciatively at Hermione.

She wore a casual but elegant navy blue robe that was trimmed in white and had a white sash tied around her waist. It accented her shape nicely, and Severus found himself unable to draw his gaze from her. Another white sash was tied around her head, somewhat like a headband, with the ties dropping to her shoulder on her left. Hermione smiled at him.

"Are you ready to go, Severus?" she asked.

Severus managed to nod his head and step out of his home.

"I thought we could just go Side-Along, if that's okay with you, as I know where the library is."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "How many times have you done such a thing, Hermione?"

Hermione laughed. "More than I can count, Severus, and I think if I can do it properly when being chased by Voldemort and a giant snake, then a little Apparition to Leeds ought not to cause me any trouble."

Severus frowned at the mention of Nagini. He looked over at her quizzically with his eyebrow raised. "When did that episode occur?"

Hermione explained her trip to Godric's Hollow with Harry and their narrow escape from Voldemort.

"Ah, yes, I remember he was in a bit of a snit when that happened. I wasn't aware that you were the one who pulled that escape off by yourself. It seems that I have underestimated your prowess, Hermione."

"Please, Severus, all of these compliments are definitely going to make my head swell," Hermione joked.

Severus, of course, scowled. That made Hermione smile. She took his arm and they twisted and Disapparated away. They appeared in between two white stone buildings, one with a large clock tower on it. Hermione turned away from the clock tower and motioned for Severus to follow her.

"The entrance to the Wizarding library is at the back of this building," she explained.

They soon had entered the building, and Severus was happy to note they had not seen any students whatsoever in the minute it took to walk to the back of the student library. His elation was short lived as there was a witch sitting at the desk at the front of the library where they entered.

Hermione noticed Severus' scowl and got close enough to whisper to him.

"You really didn't think we wouldn't run into staff here, did you?"

Severus growled at her, but said nothing. Hermione approached the woman, intent on asking her about what she was looking for.

"Excuse me, we need some help," Hermione said.

The woman looked up at the couple and smiled brightly.

"What can I do for you?"

"We are looking for an old book. I did some research at the Ministry of Magic and found a reference that it was located in this library."

The attendant looked curiously at Hermione. "How old is the book you're looking for?"

"Five hundred years old," Hermione offered.

"You'll want to head to the very back of the library. Go through the gate on the back wall. All of our old and rare books are located in the room back there. There's a catalog in that room containing a listing of the contents of the Rare Books Room. Let me know if you're having trouble finding what you're looking for."

Hermione nodded and thanked her. Severus and she headed to the back of the library. They came to the back wall and found a set of golden barred gates that opened inward. They stepped through the gates and came into a small room with two long shelves and a wall full of books. There was a little podium near the door with a box of cards on it. Hermione waved her wand over it, and the card for *Incantations for Potions* popped into her hand. Hermione read the card and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Severus asked.

"The card says that the book was on loan to the library and has now been returned to its owner."

"Does it say who the owner is?"

Hermione handed the card to Severus. His eyebrows shot up when he saw who the owner was.

"Bellatrix Lestrange," he murmured.

"Do you know where Rodolphus is? Has he ever returned to the Lestrange estate?" Hermione asked curiously.

"As far as I know, he has been on the run since Voldemort's defeat."

Hermione put her finger up to her lip and thought.

"I could Apparate over there and see if I can get into the estate," she mused. "Actually, this is probably good news. I was worried as to how we might convince this library to let us have the text once we found it. If the book is at the Lestrange estate, I can simply take it. Lestrange, being a criminal, has no say as to what happens to his property."

"You will not go there alone!" Severus commanded.

Hermione regarded Severus for a moment. "I thought you didn't want to be seen in public."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I don't, but I want you poking around in a Death Eater's home by yourself even less. I will go with you." His demeanor left no room for argument. He would be accompanying Hermione no matter what.

"Oh, you're so sweet, being concerned about my welfare!" Hermione joked, resulting in a huge scowl from Severus.

She laughed out loud and replaced the library card. They left the rare books section and thanked the librarian for her help, explaining what they had found. In a matter of minutes they had returned to the Apparition site.

"Are you sure you don't want to do some window shopping?" Hermione asked with a grin.

Severus scowled at her.

"I shall lead the Apparition this time, Hermione, as I know where Lestrange's home is."

Hermione nodded, finding his scowl at her suggestion to window shop amusing. Before she knew it they had Disapparated and reappeared in front of a mansion at the end of a long street. The mansion wasn't as grandiose as the Malfoy Mansion, but it was very elegant nonetheless. At least it had been. It had stood vacant for six years and must not have been well taken care of before that. There were broken windows, and the grounds were unkempt. The grey stucco coating the brickwork was falling off in places. The entire home was run down and battered looking.

Hermione started for the gate, but Severus' hand on her arm held her back.

"Do not underestimate appearances, Hermione. Lestrange may be hiding away in here. We must be careful."

Hermione's eyes widened with realization and she nodded her head to Severus. He went forward and pulled the gate open. It groaned loudly, announcing their arrival. Severus frowned, unhappy that anyone who might be lurking in the old house now knew they were there. Of course, if there was someone there, they had probably set a ward that would alert them to visitors anyway. He went up the walkway closely followed by Hermione and they approached the door.

Severus extended his wand and motioned for Hermione to do the same.

"We should explore the whole house first, before looking for the book, to make sure we are alone," he explained.

Hermione nodded her agreement.

He opened the door quickly, ready for a sneak attack, but none came.

"*Homenum Revelio*," Hermione chanted. "There's someone upstairs," she told Severus after a moment.

"Can you tell where upstairs?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "We'll have to explore the whole floor."

Severus nodded and led the way up the staircase. At the top, he felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder.

"I'll take this room, you go in that one over there," she advised.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "It's too dangerous. We stay together."

"Severus, I'm perfectly able to . . ."

"We stay together," he growled in a low voice.

She eyed him unhappily, but nodded in the affirmative. He pointed to the doorway on the right, and they both entered quickly, ready for anything. They were greeted by an empty room with furniture that was covered by sheets. Hermione sighed in relief, but both of them kept their wands extended. Severus wandered over to a door and snapped it open to reveal a small empty closet. Hermione flicked her wand at the thick, green curtains around the windows to push them aside. There was no one hiding behind them.

With a nod to each other, they silently left the room and went across the hall to the next room. They found much the same there. The following room was the library. Hermione was anxious to look for their missing book, but she knew that doing so was foolishness until they found whoever was hiding up here. After assuring that the library was empty, she wistfully closed the door behind her, and they went on to the next room. The search went along the same lines for the next few minutes. They had gone through half of the rooms on the floor with no luck in finding the individual hiding in the mansion. Hermione cast the locator spell again and confirmed that the subject was still on the same floor as they were.

Severus took the handle of the next door and silently opened it, sticking his wand through and peeking around the door. He immediately cast a shield when he glanced into the room, spying a figure crouched in the corner. A spell came at him too late and bounced off his shield. Hermione stepped around him and cast a hex at the figure, but the person cast a quick *Protego* spell to shield himself.

The person scurried to a standing position and sent hex after hex at Severus and Hermione. As the figure came into the light, they saw the crazed face of Rodolphus Lestrangle. They hardly recognized him. His hair was long and unkempt. It wildly framed his face. He had a beard that went down to his chest. His clothes looked like they hadn't been changed in months.

"Get out of my house!" the creature screamed and sent another hex at Severus.

Severus dodged it and sent one of his own. Before Hermione could cast a spell, ten knives flew at her head. She quickly ducked, and they passed over her without hitting her. She quickly cast the *Repello* spell silently. The next few hexes just bounced off of her as she cast some back at Lestrangle.

The man's crazed ranting was interrupted by his scream. He was enraged that his spells were doing nothing to the two interlopers in his home. His wand spurted green sparks. He let another spell course toward Hermione. The combination of his insanity and the curse broke through Hermione's defenses, and she was shot backwards and crashed into the wall, falling in an unconscious heap. Severus narrowed his eyes at Lestrangle and shot a final spell at him. The man crumpled to the floor, his eyes staring vacantly at the wall, all life having dissipated from his body.

Severus rushed over to Hermione and examined her. She was unhurt on the outside, but Lestrangle had cursed her with a spell that was slowly turning her lungs to mush. He didn't have much time. In a matter of minutes, her lungs would be unable to be healed. He lifted her up and Apparated directly to St. Mungo's.

A/N: Next up: A foolish choice.

Thank you, mystery beta, for all of your help with this. Your identity shall be revealed soon.

Thanks to all of you, too, for reading. I'm glad you are all enjoying this. Sorry for the cliffie, especially so close to the end date of the challenge, but, you know, you gotta do what you gotta do. Suffice it to say that the prompt certainly wouldn't be fulfilled if this ended tragically. ;)

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 8

Severus waited at St. Mungo's for word on Hermione's condition. He sat in a chair in the waiting room, bent over, with his hands clasped in front of him. After a long wait, a mediwitch came up to him with news. She assured him that Hermione would be alright. She just needed to stay in the hospital for a couple of days to make sure that the spells and potions they had given her to repair her lungs had worked completely. The mediwitch told him that she would have trouble breathing for a few more hours, but that should subside with the potion's healing powers. She finished her report and told Severus where Hermione's room was so he could go in and visit her if he liked. Severus rose and made his way into her room. The curtains were drawn, and the room was gloomy and dark. Hermione lay in the bed, with the covers almost up to her chin. She looked small and vulnerable in the large hospital bed. Her eyes were closed, but she opened them quickly when she heard his footsteps coming toward her bed.

"How do you feel?" Severus asked her.

"Like a piano fell on my chest," Hermione rasped. "What was that he hit me with?"

"It's a dark spell that causes the lungs to disintegrate."

"I owe you my life, Severus," Hermione said hoarsely. Her breathing was labored and raspy.

Severus didn't say anything. If he hadn't requested she find the book, they would have never been in the situation that had hurt her. He felt incredibly guilty for bringing her into the whole affair.

"Thank you, Severus," Hermione whispered and reached out for his hand.

Severus looked down at it as if it were a poisonous snake. He looked back to Hermione, and she realized he wouldn't take her hand, so she let it drop to her side.

"I won't forget what you have done," she continued.

"You need to rest," was the only thing Severus could say.

"I am resting," she murmured laboriously. "I'm lying down, aren't I?"

Severus appraised the woman in front of him. Even in the face of disaster, she was trying to be chipper. He shook his head at her as he sat in the chair next to the bed.

"I'm sorry I got you into this mess," he said finally.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I went into that house knowing what might happen, Severus. Don't blame yourself."

"If I hadn't asked you to dig up that infernal book, this would never have happened."

"Severus, that's my job. People ask me to find books for them." Hermione stopped talking for a minute to catch her breath. "Occasionally," she continued, "I need to do something dangerous. It just comes with the job. Don't think this is your fault. It isn't. If you hadn't insisted that we stay together, I probably would be dead now. Thank you."

Severus only grunted.

"When I'm out of here, I'll go back and get the book for you," she said weakly.

Severus' face turned into an angry sneer.

"Forget about the bloody book. I don't want it!"

Hermione shook her head. "No, you hired me to find it. I will find it."

"It has caused enough trouble already. The stupid book is not worth any more trouble!"

Severus didn't know why he was being so adamant. Just the thought of Hermione returning to that stupid mansion to look for a ridiculous book was enough to make him want to punch a wall. Why should he care if she wanted to risk her life in getting his book?

"You can come with me," Hermione offered.

"No, forget I asked about it. I don't want to talk about it any more. It is of no consequence to me if it is found or not, and I will not have you risking your life on my account again."

"Severus, Lestrage is dead. He can't bother us anymore."

"Drop it, Hermione. I don't want the infernal book."

Hermione sighed. "As you wish, Severus."

oooOOOooo

Hermione was released two days later. She was a bit weak, but her lungs were in perfect working order. Severus saw to it that she was settled into her bed at her home. He set a tray with lunch at her bedside before leaving her to return to his cottage.

He entered his home and sat on his couch. He had gotten some strange looks at St. Mungo's. He was unsure whether he had been recognized or not, but he had refused to leave Hermione alone. His feelings of guilt had made him stay at the hospital the entire two days she had been there. She had pleaded for him to go home and get some rest, but he had ignored her. He was now exhausted, having tried to sleep on the chair by Hermione's bed, but it had been a hopeless cause.

He was still angry with himself for involving Hermione in such a dangerous quest. He would have never consulted her if he had known what the consequences would have been. Now to top it off, he probably would see his name plastered across the front page of the *Prophet* proclaiming his return from the dead.

He got up and wandered over to his window. There were a couple of newspapers placed on the ledge, as he had not been there to receive them. He grabbed them, scowling, and opened the first one up. He quickly flipped through the rag. To his surprise, there was no mention of him anywhere. He examined the other papers, but found no trace of his name, or the fact that he had been out and about in the Wizarding world. At least his privacy had been kept intact. If anyone at St. Mungo's had recognized him, they had been quiet about it. He thanked Merlin for small favors.

Exhaustion finally hit him, and he decided to go to bed, even though it was still mid afternoon. He hadn't slept in almost two days, after all.

oooOOOooo

The next day, Hermione entered Severus' cottage with a large book in her hand. She smiled at him and handed the book to him. Severus reached out and took it, eyeing the cover. It was the book they had been seeking at the Lestrage Mansion. Severus' lip thinned into a slim line, and anger welled up within him. Placing the book down on the table, he looked at Hermione in fury.

"Didn't I tell you to forget about this?" he asked tersely.

Hermione looked taken aback. "It was really no trouble at all. I found it within five minutes of being there, Severus, and with the Aurors poking around and doing their investigation, I was completely safe. Harry and Ron were both there."

Severus slammed his hand down on the table next to the book. "I don't care if the whole bloody Ministry of Magic was there! I told you not to go back for this book!"

"And I told you, I don't leave a job undone!" Hermione said, in a bit of a snit herself.

"So, you blatantly disregard your client's wishes whenever you feel like it?" Severus shouted as he stood up in front of her.

Hermione drew up next to him. "It was a simple matter to get it. I even arranged for Harry and Ron to be there when I was there. Would you stop overreacting?"

"Overreacting?" He got within an inch of her face. "You weren't the one who saw you crash into the wall and then had to rush you to the hospital to save you from asphyxiating. You weren't the one who had to wait in the lobby while the Healers worked on you, not knowing if you would survive a curse that should have never been directed at you! How dare you accuse me of overreacting?!"

Hermione's anger softened a bit. He was only concerned for her welfare. Granted, he had an odd way of showing it, but that was Severus Snape.

"Severus, I know we were in grave danger before, but . . ."

"But nothing! You irresponsibly put your life in danger only a couple of days after it was almost taken from you."

He pulled back and sneered at her. How could she be so irresponsible? He had saved her life, and for what? The insolent, head-strong, chit had gone right back into that devil house and risked it all over again! Severus closed the distance between the two of them, placed his hands on her arms and shook her.

"How dare you!" he bellowed. "How dare you ignore my request?! How could you do such a thing? Why would you go back and risk your life after I told you to forget about that book? I told you not to go, but you ignored me completely!"

Severus shook her again. His eyes were filled with rage. There was a wild trace of fear in them also. "Don't you realize you could have been killed? What if Lestrangle was in contact with someone? What if they chose to come investigate what had happened? They would have found you..." he shook her again, "and killed you..." another shake, "without batting an eye!" he screamed.

Severus was breathing heavily now. His fury and concern about her welfare had sent him into a crazed state. Hermione stared at him, not even knowing what to say.

"Severus... I'm sorry!" she finally said.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. His hands still clutched at her in an almost possessive way.

"A partnership has to have a certain amount of trust in it, Hermione. You have just proven yourself untrustworthy."

Hermione stared at Severus as his statement sunk into her mind. She had taken his trust and stomped all over it. How stupid could she have been to misjudge him so badly? She had thought he would be happy that she had ultimately gotten the book. Of course, if she had thought about it for more than two seconds before rushing off, she would have realized that he would have done exactly what he was doing right now: blow up at her. She had run blindly and did what she thought was best, no matter the consequences.

She thought she had outgrown that little character flaw. It had plagued her throughout her school years. She had always been a thinker and a planner. Unfortunately, at times she would come to the wrong conclusion. She would think, deduce a plan, forget to think again, and stubbornly forge ahead, destroying whatever she had built up for herself prior to her stupidity. She thought she was done with such behavior. This little escapade, however, was utter proof that she was still a headstrong woman who didn't think of the consequences. She simply forged on ahead with what she felt was the right thing to do, everyone else be damned. She had been the one damned this time. She had acted foolishly.

"Severus, please..."

"How can I trust you, Hermione?" he sneered. "If you can't follow a simple request, how can I even think to trust you about anything remotely important?"

His statement spoke volumes. He wasn't talking about books anymore. He was talking about friendship and caring. He had let himself care for this woman in his arms, even when he knew it was against his better judgment. Every time he got emotionally involved with someone in even the smallest way, he paid for it dearly. They betrayed him in one way or another. Hermione Granger was no different. He had blamed himself for getting her into this mess, and she just ran right back and did it all over again! He had been a fool to let himself be coerced into helping her in the first place. It had done nothing but bring danger and exposure to his simple life.

"Severus, I'm sorry! I didn't think! I just wanted you to have that book! I just wanted to make you happy! Please! Don't think badly of me because of a stupid, ill-thought-out action!" She grasped his arms and squeezed them, trying to make him understand.

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They stood there, arm in arm, just staring at each other for several minutes. Severus was at a loss as to what to do or think. She had just been trying to please him. He had to admit that she had taken every possible precaution, even inviting her two sidekicks from the past to watch over her. *Perhaps* he was overreacting. Still, how could he trust her if she couldn't even listen to a simple request? She was ultimately trying to do something nice for him, and he had blown up at her and accused her of being reckless. It had been typical Snape behavior.

He squeezed her arms in frustration, then broke her hold on him. Stalking over to the window, he glared out into his back yard. He eyed the black tulips that he had enchanted to bloom during every season. His mood was just as black as the petals of the flowers.

Hermione was right, he had overreacted. But she could have gotten hurt. Hearing her sobs behind him didn't help his mood. She had tried to do something nice, but was rewarded by him going bonkers. *Good show, Severus. You handled that famously.*

How could he have lost control so quickly? He had thought he had abandoned such behavior with his resignation from Hogwarts. Granted, he would always have a quick temper, but one of the main reasons he had left the school was because he didn't like what he became around the students. He believed he had left such uncontrolled outbursts behind him at the school.

Did she deserve another chance? He never got a second chance, why should he give her one? Sighing to himself, he realized just how petty that thought sounded. He usually tried to not indulge himself in such drivel. Weighing his options and the pros and cons of each, he finally made a decision.

oooOOOooo

Stalking out of his back door, he left Hermione to herself. She stared after him, wondering why he just didn't throw her out instead of leaving himself. She should just turn around and go. He obviously was through with her. He didn't even glance her way before storming out of his own home.

All she could think of to do now was to go home and cry. Maybe she could take a bubble bath and have a good scream-a-thon in her enormous tub. Some picture perfect life she had! She had everything at her fingertips, yet the one thing she wanted the most was just beyond her grasp. And it was completely and utterly her own fault. She had blown it, and she knew it. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she turned and started heading for the door. She had her hand on the doorknob when she heard Severus' voice.

"Hermione, wait."

She dared not turn around. What other awful thing was he going to yell at her? She should just throw the door open and make a run for it. That would definitely be the mature thing to do. Hermione grimaced and waited for him to speak again. She heard him come up behind her.

"I'm sorry I screamed at you," he said simply.

Hermione's eyes widened. An apology? But she was the one who needed to apologize to him. She swung back around and faced him. He was holding a flower out to her. Hermione thought she would faint. She stared at the flower as if it was a creature from another planet. It was one of the beautiful black tulips that graced his back yard. He was making a peace offering. At long last, she reached out and took the tulip from his hand. She looked up at him. He seemed calm once again, if not a bit nervous.

"Severus, I'm the one who should be apologizing, not you. I'm the one who betrayed your trust. Can you forgive me?"

"You were just trying to be helpful. I overreacted, as you said."

"I didn't think. I just acted. It's an ongoing battle with me," she admitted, smiling ruefully at him.

"Well, I just lashed out without thinking too, which is an ongoing battle with me," he told her.

Hermione stared at Severus for a while. "Thank you," she said finally. "Thank you for caring enough to be upset."

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "I was upset because... oh, just forget it," he said in exasperation.

Hermione smelled the tulip he had given her. It had a light, sweet smell. She looked back up at Severus, who had an intense look on his face. She wondered at his thoughts.

"I should go, Severus. I will come back tomorrow. I think we can both use a bit of a break from each other for a little bit."

Severus only nodded. His gaze pierced right through her. She felt a shiver run down her spine and hoped it wasn't evident to him. He seemed not to notice. Hermione smiled at him, turned, and left his cottage. Before Disapparating, she thanked Merlin that she hadn't blown everything and that he had been willing to forgive her and give her another chance. She definitely needed his help with the book, but she needed him for herself ultimately.

Next up: The diary search brings a clue.

I must give a low bow to my awesome beta, who helped me see a better ending for this chapter than the one originally written. Your advice is greatly appreciated.

As for you, dear readers, thank you so much for your support and comments. This chapter ended on less of a nail biter than the last one. I hope you enjoyed it.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 9

Hermione eyed the black tulip in the vase on her coffee table. She had just gotten home from work and was taking a quick break before heading over to Severus' cottage. She mulled over the fight they had had the day before. She was happy that everything had turned out alright in the end. The possibility that after such a battle they should not even be speaking at this time loomed in front of her. Severus had given her a second chance, and she was truly grateful. He had even given her a flower as a peace offering. Now that had been a surprise.

Nonetheless, she had some trepidation about returning to his home today. She knew things would be awkward. They always were after two people had a huge row. She also would have to deal with her embarrassment. She still felt awful for betraying Severus' trust the way she had. Her actions had been foolish, and she was lucky he had forgiven her.

Maybe Severus would be nervous too. He was probably embarrassed about his part in the argument. Of course, he'd probably never show that embarrassment. He'd probably just be gruff and aloof. Well, more so than usual.

Hermione mulled over the upcoming situation. She should do something to ease the embarrassment for the both of them. She felt she owed him anyway. Perhaps she could give him something? That would show him she appreciated him letting her continue to work with him. Quickly coming up with the perfect gift from one bookworm to another, she hurried out the door and headed back to her shop.

oooOOOooo

Hermione knocked on Severus' door and heard him yell to her to enter. She had a strong feeling of déjà vu as she opened the door, expecting to see Severus bent over his desk at Hogwarts, grading papers in his classroom. Instead, he was bent over his table, studying the diary. She closed the door and joined him at the table. She gave him a tentative smile.

"Hi," she said awkwardly.

"Hermione," Severus said shortly.

Hermione sighed. She had been right about this meeting being awkward. At least she had come prepared.

"I brought something for you," she told Severus as she handed him an oblong box.

Severus looked up at her curiously and then at the extended package. It was a small gold box with a golden ribbon around it. He continued to stare at it without taking it from her hand.

"It won't bite, I promise," she assured him.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her and took her gift. He undid the ribbon and opened the box. He looked into it for a moment before reaching in and lifting out its contents. It was a very flat phoenix rimmed in gold. He turned it over and examined it curiously.

"It's a bookmark," Hermione explained. "It's enchanted to adhere to the page where you place it. It can only be removed and placed by you. It will magically underline the place on the page where you stopped reading. When you remove the bookmark, the line will disappear also."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her explanation. He examined the bookmark closely. The phoenix was a dark red, its wings extended as if it was about to take flight. Severus

ran his fingers over the smooth surface. He was surprised at the gift. It wasn't as if he had never received a gift before, but usually gifts to him came from people who were obligated to give him something. His mother, of course, had given gifts from her heart and for no reason except for the fact that she liked to see him smile. With their financial situation, the gifts were usually something simple. A small note or a hug was the extent of them usually. But Severus knew they were gifts from her, and he had treasured them.

Lily had given him a gift once. It was a birthday gift for his 12th birthday. It was a quill. He still had it, kept safe in a box in the bottom drawer of his desk. Occasionally he would pull it out and hold it reverently. Visions of the past would fill his head, and he would wonder what his life would be like if Lily had had feelings for him as more than a friend. Usually those trips down memory lane would end up in his slamming the quill back down into the drawer while tears fell down his cheeks. The quill would then not be unearthed again for a long time.

Most of the gifts her received, however, had been obligatory. Mostly he received Christmas gifts from colleagues that he would burn in the fireplace unless they caught his fancy. Occasionally, Lucius Malfoy had sent a gift on some occasion or another. He had received the odd gift now and then from someone who wanted to get on his good side. They learned swiftly that gifts were not a payoff to him and would never repeat the mistake again. But truthfully, no one ever gave Severus a gift simply because they just wanted him to have something.

He had lived all his life with the knowledge that no one liked him well enough to give him anything out of friendship. He was destined to be an acquaintance to all he knew. No one cared enough about him to do anything out of the ordinary. He was used to being looked over and forgotten unless there was some emergency only he could rectify. He didn't care. It didn't bother him that no one felt strongly enough about him to give him a small token of that esteem. He was used to being ignored.

But here was a gift without strings attached, given simply out of generosity. Severus didn't know what to make of it. There was no special holiday coming up, and Hermione had no ulterior motives in giving him the bookmark, save perhaps as a peace offering. She had given it to him nonetheless. Small as the gesture may seem, it was one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for him. He felt himself get choked up and fought with his emotions to not show her his weakness at her generosity.

He finally looked over at her.

"Thank you," he said simply.

Hermione sat down next to him and looked over at the diary that sat open on the table.

"You've gotten a head start," she mused.

"Not much of one," Severus replied, pulling himself together finally as he placed the bookmark down on the table next to the diary. "I just started about five minutes ago." His voice was as strong as it usually was again, but it had more warmth than it had when she had first entered.

Hermione and Severus buried themselves in their research. The awkwardness fell away, and they worked amiably for the rest of the evening.

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It had taken them another full week to get through Sutton's diary. Hermione marveled at how extensive it was. Severus and she had worked well together. They each skimmed the same page of the diary at the same time, catching things the other would miss. Of course Severus had snapped at her now and then, but Hermione counted it as a win when he snapped less and less each day.

They now sat at Severus' table eyeing the stack of copies they had made from the diary.

"Now what?" Severus asked.

"Now," Hermione sighed, "we read each one of these carefully looking for clues to Horatio Holt's whereabouts at the time, or any other clues that would be helpful."

They each took a paper and began to read and look for clues. After two hours of steady concentration, Hermione looked up at Severus.

"Look at this," she requested as she pushed a paper over to him.

Severus picked up the copy and read it.

Today Master Holt has left me to my own devices. He has to make a trip to Italy for the weekend. He has a summer home there and needs to make it usable for the upcoming season. Perhaps when I am a great Potions master like him, I too will be able to summer in Italy.

Severus looked back up at Hermione with an arched eyebrow.

"Italy," he mused. "But where in Italy?"

"We'll have to continue digging. Perhaps Sutton will mention it again."

They continued for another hour before ending their day. Hermione had yawned about seven times in the previous two minutes, and she knew that it was time for her to get to bed. She stood to go.

"Severus, I'm a zombie. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll keep searching," he told her.

She bent down low and looked into his face.

"Get some sleep, Severus. You don't want to miss something because you're nodding off in the middle of reading."

Severus scowled at her. "I am perfectly fine!"

Hermione stood up and gave him a dubious look. "You're as tired as I am, Severus. Get some rest."

With that she turned and let herself out. Severus' scowl grew deeper. How dare she tell him what to do! He was used to being up at all hours of the night! If he wanted to be up doing research, he would darn well be up doing research. He grabbed another copy with a sneer and began to read it. He could not concentrate; his mind kept going to Hermione. She was a bossy cow. Ordering him about like that. Of course, when she had gotten so close to him, he had noticed her eyes were quite pretty. Severus' jaw tightened. Now he was thinking of Hermione Granger as a pretty woman, instead of the child she was.

But she wasn't a child anymore, was she? Hardly... she was a beautiful woman. The buck-toothed, bushy-haired, know-it-all girl had transformed into a beautiful, shapely, knowledgeable woman with hair that was angelic and eyes that matched.

He put his head in his hands. What was he doing to himself? He should not think of a business partner like this. She was just another woman. A woman who certainly would never be interested in the likes of him! He definitely spent too much time cooped up in his cottage. He was making up romantic situations where there were none. He lifted his head and dragged his fingers along his face.

The thought of spending more time with Hermione was not unpleasant to him. She had a stunning intellect, and she was incredibly witty. He even thought she liked him a little bit. She at least tolerated him and perhaps thought of him as a friend. She seemed to laugh at him often, but he wasn't sure if that was because he was funny or

because he was predictable to her. He assumed it was a bit of both.

He thought about her laugh. It was almost musical. It lit up her face and made her eyes sparkle. He had to admit, he tried to make her laugh. He would say something snarky, and she would crack a smile. He would purposely scowl at her for smiling, and her grin would grow wider. He would make himself look extremely put out, and she would burst into laughter. Secretly he was congratulating himself for making her laugh, but his exterior showed nothing but frustration with her for making fun of him. It worked every time. He grinned to himself as he thought about it.

How had this woman become so close to him, especially in so little time? Was he really so lonely that he would grasp at any show of friendliness and cling to it? He didn't want to be close to anyone, let alone *her!*

His desire for solitude was one of the reasons he had left his job. The other, of course, was the desire to not surround himself with dunderheaded students. But the desire for solitude was why he had decided to become a recluse. He didn't want to look into the faces of people, whether he knew them or not, and see pity in their eyes. He didn't want to always wonder what their motives were. Were they being nice to him because they actually felt something akin to friendship for him, or was it just all an act?

He was the master actor and knew that it was easy to fool others into thinking what he wanted them to think about him. He was sure others would do the same. Who would truly want to be friends with him? No one. They would just pretend to be something they weren't. He couldn't deal with that. He resigned from his position and kept himself company. At least he knew that Severus Snape would never treat himself improperly or with secret disdain. It had been for the better. He had not had to think about another person or their reaction to him for quite sometime. He had not needed to worry about being close to people.

Friendships like the one with Granger were what he had been seeking to escape. Friendships were a liability. Friendships required him to let his guard down. He hated letting his guard down. After so many years of having to be secretive and guarded, he found himself feeling very vulnerable whenever he had to put his trust in another person. It made him feel as if he was about to fall into a great chasm. The only people he had ever given any of his trust to were Dumbledore and McGonagall.

He was unsure whether he should have ever trusted Dumbledore. The man had only used him for his own purposes. Their relationship had left Severus feeling used instead of feeling trusted. He had killed the wizard, his 'friend,' and had felt incredibly guilty for years. Unfortunately, it had taken all of those years to realize just how manipulated he had been by Dumbledore. Certainly there could have been another way to save Draco Malfoy's soul. If the old wizard had just up and died, Draco's soul would have been saved, the Dark Lord would have been appeased, and Severus would not have been thought a murderer by the entire Wizarding world.

He was still feeling the effects of Dumbledore's murder. Every now and then a Howler would find him in his secluded cottage. They usually had ranted on about how he was nothing but a cold blooded murderer who was hiding behind the robes of Harry Potter, who, for some reason, was protecting him. As if he would ever allow Potter to cover for him in anything!

Other Howlers had said they believed that he was following Dumbledore's orders, but that he shouldn't have. He should have had the *courage* to not kill him. Imagine the audacity of people to measure the amount of courage that he had within him. He would like to see any of those nosy busybodies do what he had to do in just one day of being a double spy. They would most likely curl into a ball on their beds, shivering wildly, never to emerge again from their miserable existence.

Unfortunately, that was how people were. They thought they knew what everyone else was about and that they had the answers to everything. That was why he had chosen to barricade himself in his cottage until very recently.

Hermione Granger had seen to his reemergence in the Wizarding world. He supposed that a couple of excursions out of his cottage really didn't count as being reintegrated in the Wizarding world, but it was much more than he had done in five years. Besides, he valued his solitude!

Who was he kidding? He was a lonely man who had jumped at the chance for some outside contact. Sure, he had been reticent at first, but he found he enjoyed Hermione's company. He enjoyed having interesting conversations with her. He enjoyed her musical laughter. What had happened to his carefully constructed anti-social persona? Hadn't he wanted to be alone?

Now he had Hermione Granger in his living room on a daily basis. His carefully constructed life was beginning to become messy. He wasn't sure if he was happy about that or not.

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As for Hermione, as she settled herself at home, she thought upon the evening's activities and was ecstatic. They had found an important clue, and the day had gone by with Severus only being snarky at the end of it as she was leaving. At this rate he would fall in love with her in...she did the Arithmantic puzzle in her head...fifty years.

She rolled her eyes as she pulled her clothes off and changed into some satiny purple pajamas. He had to come around sooner than that! She was afraid to push him though. Hopefully, he had gotten over her betrayal of his trust. He had warmed to her in the past week that they had been searching the diary. His nasty comments had come at fewer times. She had not wanted him to suspect her motives. In reality, she hadn't even been sure if he thought of her as a woman, she had been his student for so long. It had been hard for her to not think of him as her professor, and she had thought about him in the past much more than he had ever thought about her.

How would he ever fall for her? He had thought she was a know-it-all for... well... forever. Perhaps she should be more forward? Maybe she should flash more smiles at him? A few gentle caresses of his hand might do the trick? Yes, that would surely work! Then he would storm out of her house or throw her out of his, claiming she was up to no good.

This was much harder than she had anticipated. He had been so solitary for so long. Now he was suspicious of everything. Could he ever let his guard down to trust another person again? Had he ever truly trusted anybody before now? She really wasn't sure. She could only hope and keep trying to get him to let his guard down around her.

She shook her head. She would just have to be patient. Hopefully it wouldn't take the full fifty years to turn Severus' heart to hers. She laughed as she imagined herself an old lady, finally getting an even older Dumbledore-like Snape to finally kiss her. The excitement of it would probably give them both heart attacks, and they would drop dead right there.

Unfortunately, the way things were going, that was what would really happen! She rolled her eyes and chided herself for her negative thinking. She knew that if she just continued to be chipper and not let his caustic attitude depress her, she would succeed. She had to. She knew in her heart he was the only one for her.

A/N: Next up: *The return of Pierre, the creep.*

Thank you again for reading and reviewing. A huge bow goes to my mystery beta. She's truly a gem.

It seems Severus, unbeknownst to Hermione, may be coming around. We can only hope it doesn't take the full fifty years to get him swayed. Lol.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 10

Hermione had coaxed Severus out of his cottage, and they were settled on the couch in her living room, scouring through the copies that were left of the diary. Hermione had been staring at a diary entry for five minutes now. Unfortunately, her mind was really not on the task, and the entire page was nothing but a blur of words to her. Hermione put her page down and sighed. They had been searching through the large stack of copies for a week, with no other reference to Holt's summer home. She glanced over at Severus.

"Are you hungry?" she asked him.

Severus looked up at her. "I suppose," he mumbled.

She arched an eyebrow at him.

"Well, either you are or you aren't."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her.

"Yes, Mummy, I'm hungry," he snapped.

Hermione snickered at him, and as she answered, her voice became patronizing. "What can I make you, sweetie? Would you like some chicken nuggets?"

Severus scowled at her.

"Forget it!" he raged.

Hermione laughed at him as she got up and went into the kitchen. She opened her refrigerator and examined the contents. She pulled out some roast beef and sandwich fixings. In a matter of minutes, she had made up two sandwiches and had some pumpkin juice poured into large glasses. She placed everything on a tray and carried it back into the living room. She placed it on the mahogany coffee table that sat in between the two couches. Grabbing a cup and a plate, she returned to her seat and started reading where she had left off. Severus didn't move to take his sandwich.

She looked over at him and watched him for a minute as he read. She admired his strong features as he concentrated on the paper in front of him.

"Is there something on my face?" Severus asked caustically.

"No, of course not," Hermione answered.

"Then what is so interesting that you are staring at me like that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You haven't touched your sandwich. You said you were hungry."

Severus sighed. He reached over and took a huge bite of his sandwich and placed it back on the plate.

"Happy now?" he said with his mouth full.

"Ecstatic," Hermione said dryly and went back to her own lunch. She inwardly chuckled. He could be so childlike sometimes. It was annoyingly endearing.

They continued to work silently for a while, until there was a knock at her door. Hermione rose and answered it. She was surprised to find Pierre standing there with a bouquet of flowers. Pierre smiled at her as he pushed the flowers into her hand.

"These are for you, Mademoiselle," Pierre drawled.

"Oh, Pierre, thank you! They're lovely," Hermione said, not quite sure why Pierre was at her door at all, let alone giving her flowers.

"I have not 'eard from you in some time, 'Ermione. What 'ave you been up to?"

"I have been working a lot, Pierre. I'm sorry if you were expecting me to contact you."

"May I come in?"

Hermione hesitated. "Um... for a minute... sure."

Pierre walked past her in a flourish and noticed Severus sitting on the couch, glaring at him.

"Pierre Rousseau, this is Severus Snape. We are working together on a project."

Pierre bowed his head slightly, and Severus did the same before burying himself in the diary entry once again. Severus didn't know what to think about this handsome young man in Hermione's living room. She had not mentioned dating anyone, but why should she tell him such a personal thing about herself? He hadn't divulged anything about his personal life to her. Of course, besides her, he had no personal life, but that was beyond the point. He found himself a bit perturbed to find another man ogling her.

"I 'ave come to ask you, 'Ermione, if you would like to go to dinner again tonight?" Pierre asked.

Hermione frowned. This was the part about dating that she hated. She had no desire to see him again, but how to be nice about it?

"Well, Pierre," she said hesitantly, "I'm really too busy right now to go out to dinner. I have a deadline on a project, and I'm having an awful time accomplishing it in time."

Pierre frowned. "But 'Ermione, I 'ave made reservations for us tonight at an amazing restaurant in Paris."

Hermione scowled. "I'm sorry, Pierre, I can't."

"Come on, surely you can leave your work for a few 'ours. As I said, I 'ave already made all of the arrangements."

Hermione folded her arms in front of her. "Well, maybe you should have consulted me first before you made any arrangements!" Her anger increased as she stood there looking at his smug face. "I'm sorry, Pierre, I'm just not interested, okay? I had a lovely time the other night, but we really aren't well suited."

"But... but..."

"Thank you for the flowers, they are lovely," she said as she spun him around and headed for the door, pushing him along.

"'Ermione..."

"Say hi to Ron for me when you see him," she told him as she unceremoniously pushed him out the door and slammed it in his face.

She returned to her seat and flopped into it, glancing at Severus. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"What's so funny?" Hermione demanded.

"It seems you have a lot of practice throwing men out of your home."

"I'd watch what I'd say, Severus, or you'll be next!"

He arched an eyebrow at her, but decided to plod along anyway. He was incredibly happy that she was not interested in the very handsome man she had just pushed out of her home.

"He seemed like a nice enough fellow. Why did you scorn him, 'Ermione? Did 'e not make you 'appy?" Severus asked in a guttural, mock French accent.

Hermione folded her arms and rolled her eyes, letting a small chuckle escape her lips.

"He's a French Auror. He did nothing but talk about himself for the entire two hours we were dining. Then he looked put out with me when I knew a spell that he didn't. He's a pompous Frenchman."

"What spell was it that you told him about?" Severus asked curiously.

"*Repello*," she told him.

He nodded. "He's an Auror and didn't know that spell?"

Hermione looked at Severus. "See, that's what I thought!" she said in exasperation, waving her hands in the air. "How can you be in such a dangerous line of work and only use a simple Protego Spell for everything? Unfortunately, he didn't seem to find my insight helpful."

Severus scowled to himself. It seemed that most men did not take the advice of witches for fear it would somehow emasculate them. He never really understood why that was so. He had found witches like Lily, Minerva McGonagall, and Hermione to be very adept at what they did. He came out of his musing as Hermione asked him something.

"Why are you frowning?" she questioned.

Severus sighed. "It just seems foolish to me to discount someone's advice, simply because they are a witch."

Hermione smiled at him brightly. If he hadn't been Severus Snape, she would have hugged him right there. She didn't want to go overboard, however, and scare him off. She did, however, feel daring enough to make the next statement.

"I knew I liked you for a good reason!" she exclaimed.

Severus looked at her in utter shock.

"Nobody likes me," he said finally.

Hermione laughed. "Oh, of course they do, you just don't give anyone a chance to show that they like you."

Severus looked down at his lap, not knowing what to say to that.

"Minerva McGonagall likes you," Hermione went on.

"Yes, that's why she tried to kill me during the Final Battle."

"Severus, she had a good reason to do that. You had led her and everyone else to believe that you were fighting against us."

Severus scowled. He hated talking about the war and his past.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't mean to bring up unsettling memories," Hermione said as she looked down to her lap also.

Severus sat silently for a while. Finally he spoke.

"That's alright. I cannot run from the past forever," he said quietly.

Hermione took a chance and moved closer to him, placing her hand on top of his.

"Severus, you should recognize all of the good you did."

Severus scowled, but did not look at her.

"Yes, lying, killing, beating, abducting, standing by and watching children be tortured, these are all good things that I did."

"Stop it!" Hermione said sharply.

Severus looked at her curiously.

"Stop it this instant! If it wasn't for you, we would have lost this war. You made it so that Harry survived and was able to defeat Voldemort. You risked your life on a daily basis to help defeat him. You did what you had to do to survive. Stop making yourself out to be a villain. You aren't one."

Severus looked back down into his lap. Hermione's hand remained on his hand. He stared at it, but had no desire to pull away. She squeezed his hand slightly, and he looked back up at her.

"You believe me, don't you?" she asked him.

"Of course not, but you are entitled to your opinion."

Hermione chuckled. "I should expect no less from you. Opinion or not, that's how I see it, and I believe most of the Wizarding world sees it the same way."

"You are delusional then," Severus said quietly.

Hermione tilted her head and regarded Severus thoughtfully.

"And you, sir, don't give others enough credit."

Severus' head snapped to hers.

"Why should I give them credit, Hermione? Why? Did they ever give me credit? Did they? No! It has always been *Don't trust Snape. He's worthless. He's a spy. He can't be trusted. Why would Dumbledore trust him? He's devious.*" Severus' voice was getting louder by the minute. *"Snape is evil. Don't let your guard down around him. Ignore him, and maybe he'll go away. Don't turn your back on him or he'll hex you. He hates everyone. He doesn't deserve to be cared about!"*

His voice had risen so much that Hermione was tempted to block her ears. His statements were filled with pain. Hermione's eyes had filled with tears as she had watched his pain pour out with his bitter words. She closed her eyes now and looked away from him. Crossing her arms in front of her, she willed herself to stop crying.

"I never felt that way about you," she said softly.

"No?" he roared. "You never felt that way when I killed Dumbledore?"

She winced and turned back to him. "I was shocked when that happened, but part of me knew there was another explanation for what you had done. I really found it hard to believe that you would just murder Dumbledore outright."

Severus reeled back as if he had been slapped. No one had trusted in him. Not even the people he had been closest to. How could she have?

"Why would you have thought that?" he said in astonishment.

Hermione shrugged. "All those nights spent reading in the Grimmauld Place study together taught me something about you. Back then, for the first time, I realized you weren't the nasty professor you would have liked us to think you were. I realized that somewhere deep down, you were more than what you showed everyone else. If we all could be so wrong about you on such a simple level, we certainly could be wrong about you in relation to Dumbledore's death."

He looked at her, not willing to believe what she was saying.

Hermione stared off in front of her, deep in thought.

"Dumbledore always said you were trustworthy. He knew you better than practically anybody. I chose to believe Dumbledore."

Severus simply stared at her as she stared ahead. Of all the people to believe the best in him, it had been Hermione Granger, the student he had mocked so often. He looked to her and felt something, but couldn't place the feeling. Was it gratitude? Was he grateful that someone in the world had seen him for what he truly was? Was it relief that there had been one person who could look behind his awful deed and see another possibility? He wasn't sure, but it was something, and he wouldn't let it slip by without a mention.

"Hermione," he said to her.

Hermione turned and looked at him with big eyes. His heart melted at the sight. She looked to him with understanding. She looked to him without pity, without judgment. She looked to him with friendship.

"Thank you," he said, a bit choked up, "for believing in me when no one else did."

She smiled then. It lit up the whole room. He would give anything to have her smile at him like that every day.

"I was afraid you were going to yell at me and call me a fool," she admitted. "This was much nicer."

Severus smiled back at her, but only for an instant.

"We should get back to work," he said finally.

"What? Oh, yes, we should," Hermione said and began to study her diary entry again.

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Severus' demeanor changed dramatically after that. He never lost his sarcasm, but he seemed to lighten up considerably with Hermione. Realizing that he had an ally in the young woman had left Severus amazed. He had assumed that she had only tolerated him, like everyone else he knew. But she had proven that she thought more of him than that. His attitude towards her began to change slowly as he realized that she truly considered him a friend. He even began considering her a good friend in return.

He was reticent to think of her as anything more at this point, although part of him wanted to. He didn't think she had more interest in him other than friendship. He couldn't fathom her thinking of him as anything more. Women just didn't think of him in that way. Perhaps he was too dark to be loved. Severus grimaced. It seemed he was to live the life of a hermit forever. Granger and her mission would end eventually, and she would go about her merry life, forgetting she even worked with him. He would be left to himself again. How utterly depressing.

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Hermione, on her part, thanked Merlin for small favors. She felt that their talk had actually moved them along quite nicely in the friendship department. The trust that she had lost from him weeks ago now seemed to be restored. It even seemed to be stronger than it had been originally. Now maybe it would only take forty years to thaw the ice and make him love her.

A/N: Next up: Another clue that leads to a trip to the Ministry.

I hope you all enjoyed today's installment. Leave a review and tell me what you thought. Thank you all for reading, and thanks to my mystery beta, lurking in the shadows, editing furiously.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 17

Hermione Granger had a job that gave her everything she wanted. However, money can't buy the one thing she desires most, the love of the reclusive Severus Snape.

Chapter 11

Finally they had come across another clue. It had seemed to take forever, but there it was. Jumping out at them was another reference to Holt's summer home. They had been beginning to lose hope, as they had long passed the entries for Sutton's apprenticeship. Fortunately, Sutton had kept his friendship up with Holt, and now they had found the clue they were looking for. Barnaby Sutton had been invited to summer with Horatio Holt in his villa in *Venice*.

"Now what do we do?" Severus asked Hermione.

"We finish looking through the diary entries. There are only a few left. Then we need to go to the Ministry and see if we can turn up anything on Holt's villa in Venice."

"Shouldn't we just go to Venice and look there?" Severus asked her.

Hermione shook her head. "The Ministry has records on more things than anyone could imagine. We very well might be able to find what we need right there. It would be silly to travel all the way to Italy while not knowing what we're looking for, when what we need is sitting so close by. Once we know where to look, we'll take our search to Venice."

Severus nodded, deep in thought.

"Will you come with me? To the Ministry, I mean," Hermione asked him.

Severus frowned. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to be seen in such a populated place.

"You could dress up like a girl or something," Hermione joked.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "You, young lady, have gotten much too cheeky in your adulthood."

Hermione got right up in his face.

"That's because I know your bark is worse than your bite," she said with a sly smile.

She got up and walked into the kitchen to get a drink. Severus' eyes followed her. *Had she just flirted with him? No, it couldn't be.* Hermione returned in a moment, toting two tall glasses of lemonade. She handed one to Severus.

"Well, will you come?" she asked again.

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I will come, witch, but I will not dress like a girl."

Hermione chuckled at him, trying to clear her mind of the boggart that Neville Longbottom had conjured up in his third year. She found it quite impossible and doubled over in laughter, spilling half of her lemonade in the process.

"Are you through?" Severus asked caustically.

That of course, sent her into further hysterics. She luckily found the table and set her glass down as she fell to her knees, her body shaking with mirth.

Severus could only scowl at her. Forget the fact that he wanted to grab her and kiss that stupid grin off her face. He would continue to act put out.

"I..." Hermione tried to say, "I had this... flashback to third year... and you were... Neville's boggart!" Hermione managed to look up at Severus, her cheeks flushed a crimson color as she tried to control her chuckling.

Severus raised an eyebrow at her. "Yes," Severus drawled. "We all had a good laugh at that one, didn't we?" he remarked in his deep baritone.

Hermione shook her head wistfully. "Rumor had it that you were furious for a week!"

"There were appearances to be kept up" Severus responded tartly. "I actually was quite proud of myself for scaring the living daylight out of the boy enough to be his boggart."

"Oh, but, Severus, you should have seen it! You waltzed out of the wardrobe all foreboding, and before anyone knew it, you were prancing around in a green dress, complete with hat and a red purse and shoes!" Hermione could hold it in no more and doubled over in a fit of giggles.

"Yes, that certainly tops the time you resembled a beaver with enormous teeth," Severus commented snidely.

Hermione's laughter ceased. She gave Severus a stricken look. She rose suddenly and made her way to the kitchen. Severus watched her go. Merlin, he had only been joking. Why was it that every time he opened his mouth, something caustic had to come out of it? He rose and followed her into the kitchen. Hermione was leaning over the sink, staring blankly out the window. Severus came up behind her and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I was just kidding, Hermione," he said softly.

Hermione didn't look at him. "You weren't kidding that day when you said those horrible things to me."

Severus' eyebrows furrowed. "What horrible things?" he asked, truly at a loss as to what she was going on about.

She turned and looked at him sadly. "You said you saw no difference in my appearance."

Severus stiffened. "Oh... that."

"Yes... that," Hermione said tartly. She looked away and back out the window.

Severus watched her for a few moments. In their new found friendship, he had forgotten that he had once been the most horrible person alive. He had forgotten how he had treated her as a student. Obviously, Hermione Granger had not forgotten. It was amazing that she even spoke to him at all after the way she had been treated by him.

"Hermione," he called to her and squeezed her shoulder. She looked back over to him. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at him.

"I got into role playing a bit much in my Hogwarts years. I knew I could never be nice to anyone but the Slytherins. I admit that in a sadistic way, I had fun making you all fear and hate me. I know this sounds trite, but it was nothing personal."

Hermione turned fully to him. Angry eyes assaulted his. "Nothing personal? Oh, well, then forget it!" She threw her hands up and stalked around him and back into the living room. She turned back around and faced him again, pointing at him fervently.

"Do you have any idea what a complex I had about those teeth growing up?"

Severus shook his head no.

"I begged my parents to do something. They're dentists, for Merlin's sake! But they wouldn't do anything. I was plain enough as a child! I didn't need those enormous teeth to make me look so hideous."

Severus looked to her curiously. "You were never plain, Hermione."

Hermione rolled her eyes, brushed her hand in the air, and turned from him.

He was by her side in a matter of seconds. Severus grabbed her arm and turned her around, taking her arms in his hands.

"I'm sorry. I hadn't known you had been so sensitive about your teeth. I wouldn't have made such a callous comment if I had known. I'm sorry."

Hermione searched his face for duplicity, for some sign that he was just humoring her. She saw sincerity in his eyes. She softened immediately.

"It's alright. How would you have known? The whole incident gave me the opportunity to fix them myself at any rate." She smiled, showing off her now perfect teeth.

Severus pulled her to him and embraced her. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay," she mumbled into his robes. Her arms had snaked around his body. She was enjoying his embrace immensely. She should play the wounded female more often. Not that she hadn't been upset, she had been. But now she was simply elated at his hug.

"We all say things we don't mean sometimes," she continued after a minute.

Severus realized what he was doing and stiffened. His hands dropped to his side, and he pulled away from Hermione. He stared at the floor and let his hair fall over his eyes, successfully hiding his face from her. "Sorry," he muttered.

Hermione scooted up next to him again, bent her knees and peered under Severus' curtain of hair.

"Don't be," she admonished before straightening back up and heading for the sofa. She settled herself into it and grabbed another journal entry, studying it carefully to avoid looking at Severus. She knew he was embarrassed and wanted him to compose himself.

Severus stared at the petite witch as she went about her business as if nothing had happened. But something had happened. He wasn't sure just what, but it had happened. That hug... and those... feelings! He would have held her all night if he hadn't thought it would have ended their friendship right then and there. Thankfully, she hadn't minded, nor had she noticed his heart beating faster as he pulled her close. He certainly didn't want to ruin their new-found friendship only a couple of weeks into it by falling all over her like some lovesick puppy dog. No, she would never want to be *that* friendly with him.

He quickly walked over to the coffee table and grabbed his drink. He gulped it down in three large gulps. Okay, so that didn't help. He still wanted to grab Hermione and snog her senseless. Finally, he just sat on the sofa across from her and pulled another journal entry up to his face. He tried ever so hard to read it, but it was a long while before any of the words on the page made any sense whatsoever.

oooOOOooo

Hermione opened the door, and her mouth dropped open. Severus and she had finished up the diary entries and were planning to go to the Ministry today. Severus had agreed to meet her at her house, and they would Apparate there together. There he stood, but he looked so amazingly different that Hermione was unsure it was him at first.

Severus Snape stood before her with his dark sunglasses on. He wore khaki slacks and a white shirt. A *white* shirt. He had a tan suit coat slung over his shoulder. His hair, which normally hung down and fell into his eyes, was slicked back with hair gel. Hermione felt her stomach tumble. The man was a sex god in loafers.

"Wow," Hermione exclaimed. "You really do clean up nicely," she muttered.

"Do you think anyone will recognize me?" he asked her. A small smirk played across his face.

"Severus, even your own mother wouldn't recognize you looking like that. You should dress like this more often," she said with a smile.

Severus gave her a quick grin, and they were off.

"You look nice also," he muttered.

She was dressed in black slacks and a gold knit sweater top with sleeves that came down past her elbow. The buttons on the sweater were left open to reveal a white tank top underneath. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a golden headband, and it flowed behind her. She grabbed a glittery gold purse that matched perfectly with her high heels, and they were off. In a few minutes they were making their way through the many wizards that crowded the Ministry. No one seemed to recognize Severus. It seemed that his disguise was working. Actually, much to Hermione's annoyance, she caught several witches staring after him longingly.

"You're making quite the impression with the ladies, Severus," she told him.

"You have no fewer wizards trying to catch your eye," Severus retorted.

Hermione smiled, happy that he had noticed.

They got into an elevator and went to the floor where the library and reference room was located. Exiting the lift, Hermione turned right and headed in the library's direction. She had been here often enough to get here in her sleep.

They entered the library, and Severus looked around in awe. He too had been here several times, but the enormity of the reference area never ceased to amaze him. There were books as far as the eye could see. Hermione went up to a desk and pointed to a square object that rested on it.

"Have you ever used one of these Requisitors before?" she asked Severus.

He shook his head.

"They're fairly new. You request what you're looking for, and then a list of possible categories and locations for your item appears here." She motioned to an empty box next to the Requisitor. "Why don't you search for bills of sale for villas, and I'll search for property documents and tax assessments."

Severus went over to another Requisitor and asked for what he wanted. The two of them were soon in different parts of the library, researching their given topics. After an hour, Hermione had checked all of the documents in her section, coming up with nothing. She wandered through the library looking for Severus. She finally spied him sitting on the floor in the stacks, surrounded by books.

She stopped for a minute and took in his appearance. He truly was a fine specimen of a man. She had never thought that he would look good in white, but, oh, how amazingly gorgeous he looked right now. And the way those pants fit his body... He was lucky she hadn't jumped him on sight.

She shook her head. They were still just friends. No matter how much she wanted to snog him senseless, he didn't have those feelings for her yet. She thought maybe he was coming close, but she wouldn't tempt fate. She would need to be patient. She approached him and sat down next to him.

"I've exhausted my resources. Have you come up with anything?" she asked him.

Severus showed her the book he had been studying. There was a bill of sale for a villa in Venice to a Horatio Holt in the year 980 A.D.

"It's amazing that a record this old could still exist," Severus mused.

Hermione nodded her head as a huge smile covered her face. The location of the property was written clearly on the bill of sale.

"Great work, Severus! It looks like we need to start planning our trip to Venice."

"When can you go?" Severus asked as they both rose from the floor.

Hermione helped Severus put the other books back on the shelf.

"I can leave immediately. My patrons are used to me closing up shop now and again. Shall we make plans to leave at the end of the week?"

A flash of excitement crossed Severus' face before his usual unemotional mask was restored. "That is agreeable with me," he said blandly, as if it didn't matter if they ever got to Venice.

Hermione smirked at him as she made a copy of the bill of sale.

oooOOooo

It was Friday morning, and Severus and Hermione were to Portkey to Venice within the next ten minutes, as planned. They both had packed lightly for the trip, each putting everything they needed into a small duffel bag. Severus admired Hermione as she opened her door up to him. Her hair was left down, and her curls framed her face and bobbed as she moved aside to let Severus in. She wore a black business suit with a turquoise blouse underneath. Severus admired the way the pants accentuated her backside as she closed the door behind him. Hermione turned and smiled appreciatively at Severus. He was in another white shirt covered with a navy blazer. Navy pants finished the outfit. Of course, his usual sunglasses were on his face to ensure his anonymity. That man could look good in anything!

"Will you ever give up those sunglasses, Severus?" she asked in amusement.

"Not as long as people are living on Earth, Hermione."

Hermione laughed. Severus extended the Portkey, a broken pencil, for her to touch so they could begin their trip. Hermione ran over to the couch, grabbed her bag, and was back at Severus' side in a matter of seconds. The Portkey was set to leave as soon as the two of them were securely holding it. Hermione reached out and put her finger on the pencil. The world began to spin, and they dissolved into oblivion.

Upon arrival in Venice, they immediately went to their hotel. Hermione had chosen a Muggle hotel that was built in the 14th century called the Hotel Danieli. Hermione's mouth dropped open as she entered the lobby. It was beautifully ornate, with marble columns and arches lining the stairwell. Lush golden draperies decorated the windows and crystal chandeliers hung on the ceiling. Severus looked appreciatively at the décor as they moved to the reception desk.

"May I help you?" the hotel clerk said in Italian.

Hermione answered back in flawless Italian. "I have a reservation. My name is Hermione Granger."

Severus eyed her appreciatively. He had not known she was fluent in Italian. It seemed that Hermione Granger was full of hidden talents.

They waited at the desk until the desk clerk handed her a key packet, and the couple went on their way. Although the hotel was built in the 14th century, it had all of the modern enhancements. An elevator stood off to the side of the front desk, and in Hermione's hand was a keycard to enter their room.

"I reserved us a single room. I hope you don't mind," Hermione said to Severus as they made their way to the elevator.

Severus' eyes widened at her.

"I wasn't expecting to share a room with you, Hermione. That really isn't appropriate."

"Well, it's just easier," she said as they entered the elevator.

Severus looked a bit uncomfortable, and Hermione smirked to herself. Little did he know their room was a two bedroom suite. The elevator doors opened onto their floor, and they exited and soon found themselves at their room. Hermione opened the door and went in, closely followed by Severus.

"Wow," Hermione said as she looked around the lavish living room.

There were Victorian chairs and sofas in a light yellow color in the front part of the room. Towards the back was an elegant dark wood table and chairs with white cushions. Hermione looked up and gasped. The ceiling had a mural painted on it, surrounded by white stucco. On the mural were cherubs surrounding a man who was lying on a

burgundy chaise lounge. The cherubs were feeding grapes to the man. The entire mural was simply breathtaking.

"I need one of these in my house," she said breathlessly as she stared up at the mural.

"It doesn't go with your décor," Severus replied.

She looked over at him and smirked.

"So, which bedroom do you want?" she asked him.

His eyebrows rose. "There are two?"

"Well, you didn't expect to be sharing a bed with me, Severus, did you? That would be inappropriate!"

Severus scowled at her. "I'll take the one on the right," he said.

Hermione headed for the bedroom on the left and was again awed by the beauty of the room. Thick luxurious draperies hung from the windows in a beige color. The bed had a beautiful canopy, also in beige. The furnishings were made of an expensive dark wood that elegantly complimented the room. She sat down on the bed and felt it sink down under her. She groaned in pleasure and lay down completely on the bed.

"Oh, yeah," she said as she got comfortable.

"Having fun?" Severus asked as he leaned against the door frame.

Hermione popped back into a sitting position, looking sheepish. Her embarrassment disappeared as she took in Severus' lithe form, completely relaxed, as he leaned against the doorway. She wished she could freeze Severus right there and keep him in that position forever. He exuded all sorts of sexiness just with a simple pose.

"This bed is amazingly comfortable," she explained.

"Yes, so is mine, I'm sure, but I am not here to take a nap."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Lighten up, we just got here," she told him in no uncertain terms.

Severus furrowed his brow. Normally he would be quite put out by Hermione's candor, but he had grown accustomed to her teasing over the past few weeks. He knew there was no malice behind it. He had grown accustomed to a lot of things about Hermione. He found he enjoyed her company immensely. She was smart and funny and easy to talk to. He found his heart growing fonder of her by the minute. Of course, he knew his feelings were nonsense; she could never care for him in that manner. For now, he was happy to simply have her friendship.

He frowned at her and turned back into the living room. Hermione frowned as well, thinking she had angered him. She rifled around in her duffel bag and removed the map she had gotten at the Portkey station. With the map in hand, she followed Severus back into the living room. Going over to the table, she opened the map and stretched it out so they could find where Holt's villa was located.

"I thought you didn't want to get started so quickly," came Severus' dry retort.

She smiled to herself. "I know you're excited to get going on this," she said simply.

"It matters not to me whether we do this now or later," he said blandly.

Hermione looked over to him. His face was a mask. She had realized a while ago that his expressions were the least readable when he was trying to hide something.

"Uh huh," she remarked.

Severus rolled his eyes and came up next to her and looked at the map. Pointing to an area north of the main city, he circled it with a finger.

"The villa should be somewhere in this vicinity," he said.

Hermione pulled out the bill of sale, and they began to look for Via Porta, which was the street, or canal, where the villa was located. It didn't take long to find.

"It's not very long, we should just Apparate to the head of it here and walk down it," Hermione suggested.

"Alright," Severus said. "Shall we do a Side-Along Apparition?"

Hermione nodded, and they were soon arm in arm. Hermione wished they could remain that way for the rest of the day, but that was not to be. With a pop they had Disapparated and reappeared next to a narrow canal. It was out in the country, and there were fields surrounding the canal. Off in the distance towered a castle. Hermione caught her breath.

"Do you think that's it?" she said breathlessly.

"That's quite a villa if it is," Severus remarked.

They made their way along the canal, and before long they were standing in front of the castle. It was surrounded by a wrought iron fence. The gate was standing open, and there was a modern looking sign that said *Torre de Holt: Museo*. Hermione grasped Severus' hand in excitement.

"It's a museum! We'll have no trouble getting in and looking around!" she exclaimed.

A shock went through Severus at her touch. He was slightly startled to note that she didn't pull away when she had realized what she had done. He didn't know what he had done to deserve the touch of this witch, but he wasn't complaining.

Hermione started to pull him through the gate at a fast pace. He smiled at her excitement. His was bubbling up inside him. The thought that they might have the book in their possession soon was making him elated. They both hurried forward to the entry of the castle, hand in hand. Hermione stopped short in front of the door and gave Severus' hand a little squeeze before letting it go.

"Here we go," she told him.

They entered the castle and admired its high ceiling. It must have risen twenty feet from the floor. To the right of the entry there was a woman sitting at a desk. Hermione and Severus went over to the desk. Hermione placed a few Euros in the collection box and spoke with the receptionist, asking if there was a library in the castle. The woman handed her a map and told her that there was a library at the top of the tower. She thanked the woman and turned to Severus.

He turned to the woman and said, "Grazie."

As they headed to the back of the castle, Hermione told him what the receptionist said.

"I understood her, Hermione," he told her.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Why didn't you tell me you spoke Italian?" she demanded.

"You never asked," Severus replied.

Hermione huffed. "I should have known you did anyway. Is there anything you can't do?"

Severus regarded her with a raised eyebrow. "I am just as much of a know-it-all as you are."

Hermione blushed furiously. She shook her head and smiled a little.

"So, how many languages do you speak?" she asked Severus.

"I speak Latin, of course, because of their use in spells and potions. I also speak Italian, German, and Russian."

"Why Russian?" Hermione asked curiously.

He shrugged. "I like the sound of it."

Hermione chuckled.

"What other languages do *you* speak, Hermione?"

"I'm fluent in French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Swedish."

"How did you ever find time between your studies and fighting Voldemort to learn all of those languages?"

Hermione laughed. "I grew up speaking French. My parents love visiting France, and they taught me as a child. Italian and Spanish came easily with my knowledge of French. The German and Swedish are new acquisitions since I opened the book store."

Severus nodded in understanding. They had been climbing a spiral staircase during their conversation and finally had reached the top. Two great wooden doors sat open, revealing a circular room filled with books. Books lined the walls, and there were several shelves in the center of the room. All in all, it was an impressive collection.

"Where do you want to start?" Severus asked.

Hermione sighed. "Let's just walk around and see if the books are arranged in any sort of order."

They headed into the library and perused the stacks for a while. The books were arranged by category. There were many groupings including literature, history, and science. Severus noticed something odd about a grouping of books and wandered over for a closer look.

"These books have been enchanted to appear normal to Muggles, but they are all about Magic," he mused.

Hermione came closer. From afar, they had looked ordinary, but the closer she got, the titles began to shimmer and shift. As she came right up to them, all of the titles had changed to topics of the Wizarding world. Her heart began to race. Could the book possibly be here?

Before they had time to look at the titles carefully, a head popped through the books and glared at them.

"Just what are you doing in my library?" the ghost demanded.

A/N: Is he a good ghost or a bad ghost?

Will Severus and Hermione find the book in the castle? Will Severus finally admit he's in love? Will he realize, more importantly, that Hermione has feelings for him too? All these questions and more will be answered after the voting hiatus. Big hugs to my beta, who is awesome. Hugs and kisses to all of you for reading and for your enthusiasm for this little tale.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 17

Who is the ghost that popped through the book case?

Chapter 12

Severus and Hermione were taken aback by the appearance of a ghost's head in the book stacks of Horatio Holt's castle. They quickly steadied their frazzled nerves. Severus looked to the ghost before he spoke.

"We are searching for a book," Severus said darkly. "Is that not what one does in a library?"

The ghost narrowed his eyes at Severus.

"Sir, would you be Horatio Holt?" Hermione asked in deference.

The ghost looked startled. "You have heard of me?"

Hermione smiled. "We have been searching for information about you for several months now, sir."

Horatio emerged fully from the bookshelf and gave Hermione a wide grin.

"Here I thought I had been forgotten! How lovely it is to see people who know who I am!"

Severus had been ignoring the ghost and staring up at the books. Finally he spotted what they were looking for.

"Up there," he pointed and motioned to Hermione.

She looked up and saw *The Potions of our Time* sitting up on the top shelf. She gasped.

"There it is!" she exclaimed.

Horatio looked up to where the two had been pointing. He rose so he was level with his work.

"Are you searching for my book?" he said in delight.

"Yes, sir! For centuries it has been lost to the world. Most people believe it is a fantasy," Hermione explained.

"May I remove it?" Severus asked the ghost deferentially.

Horatio thought about it for a while. "Yes, you may," he acquiesced.

Severus pulled one of the ladders over to where they were and climbed to the book. He carefully removed it from its place on the shelf. It had not been touched for ages. The book was old and leather bound. It was incredibly thick, at least six inches wide. It was covered in dust. Severus blew on the cover to get rid of the dust, but immediately regretted it as he was consumed by a coughing fit from the cloud he had made. After controlling his coughing, he descended the ladder again and displayed the tome for Hermione to see. She touched it reverently, admiring its dark green cover and golden embossed lettering.

Severus cracked the book open in another cloud of dust and began to carefully flip through the pages. His eyes lit up, and he was unable or unwilling to mask his excitement. Hermione watched him covertly as he went through the text slowly. Finally she turned to Holt.

"Sir, would it be alright if we brought your book back to England with us?" she asked.

Horatio suddenly looked angry. "That is mine! I am unwilling to part with it!"

"It's not as if you can take it down and read it yourself!" Severus barked.

"Nonetheless, it is mine, and its rightful place is here with me. It is the only copy ever made!" Holt bellowed.

Hermione moved a little closer to the ghost.

"Mr. Holt, I know this book is precious to you. It's precious to us also. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Wizarding world could know that it really exists? I'm sure there are things in there that have long been forgotten, even by the Potions masters of our time."

Horatio thought about what she had said. "It would be nice to be recognized again for my work," he mused.

Hermione gave him a smile, trying to move him to accept her proposal.

Horatio frowned. "That being said, I cannot let just anybody have this. It has dangerous potions in it that could do much harm if it were to fall into the wrong hands. I will only let a Potions master take it!"

"That is fortunate, for I am a Potions master," Severus said in his deep baritone.

Horatio moved down so he was almost nose to nose with Severus.

"Prove it!" he challenged.

Severus unbuttoned a few of the buttons on his shirt and pulled the left part of it to the side. There on his chest was a small tattoo. It was a black cauldron about an inch in diameter.

Horatio's eyebrows rose. "The mark of the Potions master!" he cried.

Hermione got close to Severus and examined the tattoo.

"So, when you become a Potions master, you get a tattoo like that on your chest?" she asked.

"Or on the arm," both men said in unison.

They locked gazes and smiled at each other, a newfound camaraderie between the two. Horatio suddenly looked at Severus seriously.

"If I let you have the book, you must promise me that no evil will come of it."

Severus' face fell. "I am not the one from which to be asked such things. I have used my abilities before in the service of a Dark Wizard."

Holt looked at Severus levelly. "And do you serve him now?" Holt demanded.

"No, and I haven't for years, but there was a time when I served him faithfully," Severus revealed.

"What made you turn from his side?" Horatio asked. His eyebrows were narrowed as he looked upon Severus.

"Knowledge," Severus explained.

"What sort of knowledge?"

"I realized his true self. I recognized myself becoming like him. I saw how his influence had caused me to betray a friend, leading to her entire family's death. I finally grasped that his goals, though enticing, were evil. I understood what the world would be like if he had won."

"What did you do with this knowledge?" Horatio asked curiously.

"I fought to destroy him."

"Did you succeed?"

"It took many years, but yes, he was eventually defeated."

Horatio stared at Severus for many minutes, debating within himself. Hermione could only stand by and watch the two of them. She marveled at Severus' candor. Merlin, she loved him. Just his acknowledgement now of what had happened made her heart swell with love for him. Certainly Horatio would see the good man that he had become and let him have the book.

"I will allow you to take the book," Horatio said. "You have proven your loyalty."

With his decree, Horatio Holt dissolved into nothingness. Hermione watched him disappear as excitement filled her. She threw her arms around Severus, mashing the book between them.

"You did it! You convinced him!" she exclaimed.

Severus stiffened as her arms wrapped around him. He had not expected her to hug him, but he had to admit, it felt nice. He pulled one of his arms free and wrapped it around her. After a minute, they pulled apart, both slightly embarrassed.

"We still have to get the book out the door," Severus said.

"Let me see it," Hermione commanded, her hands outstretched.

He handed it to her, and she looked at it closely.

"Its Muggle image is a modern book, see? It's got an ugly orange cover, and it's about Chemistry."

She opened the cover and looked at the copyright.

"1951," she muttered. "I don't think we'll have too much trouble convincing the receptionist to let us have this."

She snapped the book closed, and it reverted to its original, older look. They made their way down the long spiral staircase, through the castle, and to the front entry. Hermione approached the desk and began to speak to the receptionist in Italian.

"Excuse me," she said, "I know this is a strange request, but I wonder if we could purchase this book?"

The receptionist regarded her curiously. "Signorina, I assure you, if we started selling the books contained in our library, it would soon be empty."

Hermione gave her a small grin. "I understand that, it's just that my friend and I are both Chemists, and we have never come across this book before. We would love to add it to our own library."

The receptionist looked the two of them over and put her hand out.

"Let me take a look at the book," she offered.

Hermione handed it over, and the receptionist flipped through the textbook. It wasn't anything remarkable. She examined the copyright and then closed the book, looking back up at Severus and Hermione.

"Well, it's a newer book. I suppose no harm would come of you taking it. How much are you willing to pay?"

"What would you ask for it?" Severus requested.

The woman looked down at the book again. She looked to Hermione.

"One hundred Euro," she told her.

"I'll give you two hundred, and you can use the extra hundred as a donation to the museum."

The receptionist smiled widely. "Thank you, Signorina. That is very generous."

Hermione took out her wallet and pulled out the money. She handed it to the receptionist, and Severus picked up the book. The receptionist shook Hermione's hand and thanked her for her generous gift. Severus and Hermione turned and left the museum and headed down the walkway, talking excitedly.

"You didn't haggle about the price at all?" Severus mused.

"We'll be paid much better than two hundred Euros for finding this, Severus. It was well worth the investment."

Severus stroked the book lovingly. "I can't believe we found it! It has been considered a myth for so long. I can't even imagine what the Potions world will do and say about this find."

Hermione watched him fondly. She couldn't remember a time when she had seen him so excited.

"Perhaps Master Nottingham will let you borrow it sometime."

Severus' eyes lit up. "Do you think he might?"

"He's rather fond of me. I might be able to persuade him to let you have it now and then."

Severus grinned like a child in a candy store. Hermione laughed at him. He snapped his head up and knit his brows together.

"Sorry," Hermione said. "You just look so cute when you're excited."

Severus scowled at her and looked back down at the book. Hermione thought she saw a bit of color rise to his cheeks, but she didn't dare mention anything about it.

They had reached the gates and were ready to Apparate. Hermione slipped her arm through Severus'. They turned in unison, reappearing in their hotel room within seconds. Severus immediately went to the table, put the book down on it, and started looking through it. Hermione couldn't hold her smile away as she wandered up behind him and looked at the book from over his shoulder.

The tome was organized from easiest potions to most difficult. Severus quickly went through the first half of the book, recognizing everything that it contained. After that, he started reading more in depth. There were potions he had only dreamed of and some he had never even considered. How had all of this knowledge been lost?

There were potions that altered personalities, ones that healed in an instant, others that accentuated the best qualities of a person both physically and mentally, draughts of knowledge, power, strength, stamina, and anything you could think of. Severus shook his head as he looked at all of the unique things that were in the pages of the book. It was truly remarkable.

He stopped at a potion for restoring limbs and other body parts. That would have been incredibly helpful during the war. He had been so engrossed he didn't even know Hermione was looking over his shoulder until she spoke.

"A limb restorer!" she exclaimed.

Severus refrained from jumping at her outburst. He looked behind him to see her leaning over his shoulder. How long had she been there? He had definitely lost himself in the ancient tome.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" he said finally.

"I'll say. We might have been able to save George's ear."

Severus stiffened at her reference. Hermione immediately regretted her faux pas.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean to bring up a bad memory, Severus."

Severus just nodded.

Hermione grimaced and decided to change the subject.

"You know what this calls for?" she asked him.

Severus turned his head and arched an eyebrow at her. She smiled at him.

"A celebration! Let's go out and celebrate!"

Severus rolled his eyes, but was not averse to her suggestion.

"What do you suggest we do?" he asked her.

Hermione thought about it. "A little sightseeing, a nice lunch, and a Gondola ride."

Severus gave her a curious look. "You've got everything planned out I see. It's as if you expected us to be successful."

Hermione smiled widely at him. "It never hurts to be optimistic," she said with a grin.

oooOOOooo

They had a lovely afternoon. They wandered around St. Marks Square for a while, exploring the clock tower and the Basilica. Finally they found a cute café and ate lunch. They sat on the Piazza at a table shaded by an umbrella and watched tourists hurry by as the two enjoyed their meal. Hermione was having such a great time she was smiling constantly. Severus found her enthusiasm to be endearing. He too found himself smiling more than he would normally do because of her bright mood.

They finished up their lunch and found a secluded place to Apparate to the Grand Canal. Before long they were being serenaded by a gondolier singing Italian love songs. Hermione enjoyed herself immensely. The only thing that was missing was a deeper relationship with Severus. She wished that her relationship with him had progressed a little more, for she would have loved to have his arm around her while the gondolier sang of love as they glided along the canal passing under beautiful bridges.

Severus, too, found himself wishing they were involved, because the serenade of the gondolier had made him wistful for the companionship of a beautiful woman. A realization came to him suddenly. The only woman he would want to be with was right here with him now. He looked to Hermione and saw her smiling face, which was radiating joy. How he wished she would look at him like that. How he wanted to pull her close and just cuddle her as they sailed along in the Gondola. But he knew she didn't care for him like that. Friendship was one thing, and he knew she considered him a good friend. He considered her the same, but she didn't have romantic feelings for him. She couldn't.

Suddenly he became upset. Why was it that every girl he was interested in was unattainable to him? Perhaps after all he had done in his past, he didn't deserve happiness, but it certainly would be nice to have some. He frowned and watched the buildings go by.

"Oh, Severus, look how beautiful that building is!" Hermione exclaimed as she pointed to a large domed building that was very ornate. Its dome seemed to be covered in gold. Severus just grunted. Hermione looked at him curiously, but decided to ignore him. If he wanted to be sour, he could do so by himself. She turned to her side of the Gondola and enjoyed the rest of the ride.

All too soon, the ride was over, and the couple had Apparated back to their hotel room. Severus picked up the Potions book, went to his room and slammed the door. Hermione stared after him and sighed. She thought they were having a good time until the boat ride. She shook her head. She could not read that man for anything.

oooOOOooo

Several hours had passed, and Severus had not emerged from his room. Hermione wondered if she had said something to upset him. She went to his door and knocked. She heard nothing, so she cracked his door open a bit and peeked in. Severus was lying belly down on the bed studying the ancient tome they had discovered. Hermione went over to his bed and stood there for a minute.

"Severus?" she said finally.

Severus' head snapped up, and he scowled at her.

"What?" he snapped.

"I was wondering if you were getting hungry. It's past dinner time."

"No," he snapped again and return to his book.

"Did I say something that upset you?" Hermione continued.

"No," he said curtly.

"Then why are you ignoring me and snapping at me?" she asked, beginning to get angry.

Severus shut his eyes and put his head down.

"I am not ignoring you, I am just studying."

"You barricaded yourself in here without a word to me. That was inconsiderate of you."

Severus sat up, looking annoyed.

"I'm sorry, Mummy, I didn't realize I had to report to you when I was going to do something."

Hermione looked as if she had been slapped.

"Why do you have to be so horrid?" she asked softly.

"Why do you have to be such a busy-body?" he countered.

Hermione stared incredulously at Severus. What had happened to him? It was as if they had been teleported back to the first day she had troubled him. He was almost snarling at her. What had she done to deserve such horrible treatment?

"Why are you acting like this?" she asked.

"Because this, Hermione, is the way I act!" Severus shouted with a flourish of his hand at himself.

"No, it's not," she argued.

He got up from the bed and stood nose to nose with her.

"I don't know what kind of fantasy you've spun in your head, but its time for you to wake up. I'm not a nice man, Hermione. I never was and never will be!"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears as she stared into his hate-filled eyes. She slowly backed away from him, but stopped in the doorway.

"Fine!" she said. "If you want to spend the rest of your life alone, go ahead. See if I care!"

She turned and fled from the suite.

Severus stared after her, his jaw clenched. What in Merlin's name had he just done? He was so wrapped up in trying to not feel anything for her that he treated her like a pariah. What was his problem? Why couldn't he just be friends with her and let it be? Why did he have to tear her head off when she only had come in to see if he was hungry? What kind of friend did that? A lousy one... that's what kind of friend did that.

His shoulders slumped, and he looked to the floor. He truly wasn't a nice man. Why couldn't he compel himself to be a nice man?

oooOOooo

Hermione stormed out of the room and slammed the door. Tears streamed down her face. Anger welled within her. That man was infuriating. She had only been trying to see if he was hungry. Why must he take everything the wrong way? She pressed the call button for the lift and waited for it while tapping her foot furiously. She wiped the tears from her face and tried to compose herself. Soon enough the lift came. Hermione found herself descending to the lobby area of the hotel. She exited the lift and headed for the small sandwich shop she had spied in the corner area of the lobby. She entered and sat at the bar.

"May I have a hot chocolate, please?" she asked the waitress.

"I'll get that for you right away, Miss."

Whenever Hermione was upset, she found a steaming cup of hot chocolate calmed her nerves. Soon the cup was set in front of her, topped with a heap of whipped cream. Hermione smiled and grabbed a spoon, scooping the whipped cream into her mouth and finishing it in two bites. She was so engrossed she failed to see a man sit next to her.

"Isn't it a bit warm for hot chocolate?" the man asked her.

Hermione glanced his way and smiled. He had dark hair and blue eyes. He was smiling at her, encouraging her to be friendly.

"It's a comfort food," she explained.

"Why would a beautiful woman like you be in need of comfort?"

Hermione wanted to roll her eyes, but she also wanted to be polite, so she just chuckled.

"I've just had an incredibly trying day."

"So, what brings you here? I'm from America. I'm attending an auto conference for higher-end vehicles. I make custom cars for the rich and famous."

Hermione looked to the man with interest. "That really sounds fascinating."

"Oh, it is. I make about one hundred cars per year. Each one is unique and built to the customer's specifications. What business are you in?"

"I am a book seller. I'm here looking for new titles for my shop."

They chatted for a few more minutes. He told her his name was Steve, and she told him her name was Hermione. They discussed the uniqueness of her name for a while. Then Steve moved in closer to her.

"Do you see that couple over there?" he motioned over Hermione's left shoulder.

Hermione turned to see who he was talking about. As she did, Steve pulled a small bag out of his pocket and poured a white powder into her drink. He swirled the cup rapidly.

"What about them?" she asked.

"Doesn't the man look like that actor, Johnny Depp?" Steve asked her.

She turned back to him and gave him an incredulous look.

"Not in the slightest!" she said chuckling.

Steve just shrugged. "Well, I thought he looked like him."

Hermione reached for her cocoa and took a swig.

"So, how long are you in town?" she asked Steve.

"I'm leaving in the morning. I'm just looking for a little bit of fun before I head home."

Hermione nodded her head and then finished off her cocoa.

"Can I get you another one of those?" Steve asked her.

"No, that's very kind of you, but one is usually my limit."

"What's wrong? Are you afraid you'll get a hangover?"

Hermione chuckled. "No, of course not. I just can only take a certain amount of sweetness each day."

She put her hand to her head. Everything had seemed to go blurry all of a sudden.

"Are you all right?" Steve asked with mock concern.

"Yeah, my eyes just went blurry." She looked over at Steve. She saw two of him.

"I don't think I feel so good. I'd better get back to my room," she said worriedly.

She stood and stumbled. Steve rose and caught her.

"You know what I think you need? You could use some fresh air. Let me take you outside for a minute. We'll take a short walk. I bet you'll be good as new in no time."

"Well, alright," Hermione agreed. Something inside her told her not to do it, but she found it hard to listen to that something and readily agreed.

Steve grasped her elbow and led her out of the hotel. They headed slowly down the street, his destination an alley not too far away.

A/N: Next up: What happens to Hermione?

So, one mystery was solved, now on to the mystery of what will happen with Hermione. You're probably happy I left you with that ghost cliffie before the vote instead of this one, right? Mwahahaha. I will update quickly and not leave you hanging too long. Thank you all for your support and reviews. I love to hear from each and every one of you. Even if you don't review, I appreciate your 'tuning in' for every update. Oh, yes, a huge hug and major thank you to Lilith Kayden, my beta, who has worked her tail off to get these chapters into a readable and understandable format.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 17

Will Hermione escape from Steve before he does something terrible?

Chapter 13

For the last half hour, Severus had been berating himself over his treatment of Hermione. Why couldn't he just treat her nicely? What would be the harm in that? She was just trying to be his friend. Given her parting statement, perhaps she wanted even more. He had been thinking that over for the last little while. Why would she care if he were alone or not? Could it be possible that she wanted to spend more time with him?

Ever since he had barricaded himself in his room, he had been telling himself to distance himself from her because, surely, now that they had found the book, she would not need his help anymore. He had imagined a handshake and a thank you. Then he would never see her again. The realization that his life would seem empty without her bright personality had hit him strongly. Before Hermione had barreled into his life, he had thought it to be serene and fulfilling. Now he had realized the truth. It had been empty and lifeless. She had burst through his door with her sunny personality and had entwined herself in his life. How could he have not fallen in love with her? She was everything he admired in a woman. She was intelligent, she could hold her own in an argument, she was funny, and she was beautiful. The only thing that she wasn't was his.

The realization that she never would be had set a ball in the pit of his stomach. There would only be a few more hours with her, then they would part, and he would be alone. His insides had burned as he realized he no longer wanted to be alone. All of this reclusive behavior had not been the sanctuary for which he had hoped. He had denied himself real life. He had forgotten what it was to live and love. She had brought that all back to him. How could he possibly continue existing the way he had been without her? His life would be meaningless.

But what could he do? he had thought. They would separate, and if he were lucky, she would owl him once in a while. He had wanted more than that. He had wanted her... all of her. He had wanted to be the only wizard she smiled at, the one she confided in, the one she loved exclusively. But he had known in his heart that would never be. No one ever had loved him like that, and no one would. He had given up the gift of being loved when he had become a Death Eater and a spy. His dual role had forced him to keep away from everyone. Now, no one could love him because of his past.

He had stewed like that for hours, slowly resolving himself to the fact that Hermione and he would not be spending time together again and that he should distance himself from her to avoid further heartbreak. Then she had come in, and he had exploded. He had been angry with himself for even caring. Then he had had the gall to take it out on Hermione. She had only been trying to get him to go to dinner.

As he came back to the present, he found himself at a loss. Why had she said what she did? Why did she care if he was alone? How could it matter to her? She could have anyone she wanted. He knew she would never choose him. Not when there were so many better choices to choose from. He berated himself for reading too much into what she had said. She had obviously just meant that he would have no friends because of the way he acted. She was right, of course, but now she had fled, and he couldn't tell her that he agreed with her, nor could he apologize for being a git.

As he thought about her, he suddenly had a feeling of dread. The hairs at the back of his neck stood on end. This was not a feeling to be ignored. It had saved him more than once during his spying years. Hermione was in trouble, he knew it. Severus rose quickly and grabbed his wand. He left the room in search of her.

oooOOooo

Stepping out of the lift, Severus went over to the corner of the lobby. He covertly extracted his wand and laid it in his hand.

"Point me to Hermione Granger," he told it.

The wand pointed toward the door. She had left the hotel. He exited the building and was surprised to see Hermione about a half a block away with a dark-haired man. He was trying to lead her down the street, but she was twisting her arm in his, trying to break his grasp.

"I said we should go this way," the man insisted.

"No, look," Hermione said with a laugh. She pointed in the opposite direction. "The canal is right over there." She pointed back where the man wanted to take her, "That way is dark and dreary."

"But it's more interesting!" the man said, desperately trying to convince her.

"No, I want to go this way," she said, her speech slightly slurred. Hermione headed off in the direction in which she wanted to walk.

The man tugged her back to him.

"Hey! Whatdja think yer doin?" Hermione tried to say haughtily.

Severus made himself known at that point.

"Hermione, is everything okay?"

Hermione's head moved around to him.

"Oh, Severus!" Her rapid head movement caused her to sway a bit. "I was just taking a walk with Steve, but we can't decide which way to go."

When she had said that, she promptly collapsed onto the pavement in unconsciousness.

Severus turned and pointed his wand at 'Steve.'

"What did you do to her?"

"What's it to you? Are you going to poke me with your stick?" Steve said in annoyance.

Severus closed the distance between Steve and himself and poked him in the chest with his wand.

"This is no ordinary stick, I assure you," Severus warned. "What did you do to Hermione?"

"I just gave her something to make her relax," Steve said nonchalantly. "She won't remember a thing in the morning. What're you anyway, her father?"

Severus sneered at Steve and drew back his wand. He understood what this foul cretin had been planning. He would kill this evil bastard for trying to hurt Hermione. The curse was just about to leave his lips when he heard Hermione call to him.

Steve was looking at him with apprehension as Severus lowered his wand. Severus regarded him furiously. He raised his wand again and cast a spell at the man's private area. Steve doubled over and groaned in pain. Severus quickly Obliviated him. This creep would never hurt another innocent woman. With the spell Severus had cast, he'd be lucky to ever get intimate again, let alone try to take advantage of a woman. He rushed back to Hermione as Steve looked around stupidly.

"Where am I? Who am I, for that matter? Why does my groin hurt like hell?"

Severus offered him some help. "You were attacked by a robber. He kneed you in the groin. If you go into that hotel and tell the desk clerk you've lost your memory, I'm sure they'll be able to help you."

Steve nodded at Severus. "Thank you," he said as he straightened up. He grimaced and stooped back over, covering his privates protectively with his hands. Finally, he managed to stagger off to his new future.

Severus turned his full attention to Hermione as he helped her to a sitting position on the ground.

"Severus, I'm s-sorry I ran out on you."

"Hermione, it's alright. Did he hurt you?"

She smirked at him. "No, but he's an idiot. He didn't even know which way the canal was!"

"Can you stand?" he asked while looking her over for injuries.

"Sure!" she said flippantly.

He helped her to her feet, just to have her collapse again. He deftly caught her, slid his arm under her knees, and picked her up in his arms.

"I think my knees'r a little weak," she giggled.

"Let's get you back to the hotel, shall we?" Severus asked.

"Mmm," Hermione said as she rested her head against Severus' shoulder.

"Severus, you smell so good!" she told him, burying her nose in his neck and sniffing deeply. "Why do you always smell so good?"

Severus flushed crimson as he walked back toward the hotel.

"Are you doing alright?" he asked her finally.

"I am now that you're here," she sighed and snuggled closer into him.

"Severus, why don't you ever kiss me?" she asked plaintively.

Severus almost choked.

"I bet you'd be a wonderful kisser. Your lips look so soft." She took her fingers and traced his lips, sending shivers down Severus' spine.

"Perhaps we should speak of this when you're feeling better, Hermione."

"I feel fine!" she said as she slapped his chest. "I asked you a question, I 'spect an answer!" she demanded as she slowly poked his chest with her index finger.

"Hermione, why would I kiss you?"

"Geez, Severus, what does a girl have to do to getchu to notice her?"

They reached the hotel doors, and Severus headed for the lift, ignoring the stares he was getting as Hermione threw herself all over him. 'Steve' was animatedly talking to

the desk clerk, saying he had no idea who he was or where he was from. He was slightly stooped over, obviously still in pain. Severus smirked at him. Finally the lift arrived. Severus stepped into it, moving his body into the panel and hitting the button for the right floor.

"Don't you find me attractive?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide.

Severus' heart melted within him. Of course he found her attractive, but how could he tell her that? She was under the influence of some drug that was making her hallucinate and say all sorts of things.

Hermione took her hand and stroked his face.

"I thought I was getting through to you. When are you going to let yourself feel again, Severus? Don't you deserve to feel? To love? To be loved?"

"Hermione, why would you ever be interested in someone like me? You have all of London to choose from."

"Phtt," she blew a raspberry. "They're all a bunch of brainless twits. All they want is a pretty lady on their arm. Forget about adult conversation. I'm tellin' you, Severus, I've looked and looked. There's no one for me out there."

She waved her hand around as she spoke in slurred speech. "No one understands me," she drawled. "They don't know how to talk to me. I'm too smart for them."

At this point she leaned so far back that Severus fought to keep her in his arms.

"They're all intimidated by me, or they're so full of themselves that they have no desire to learn anything about me. All I want is to have a decent conversation, for Merlin's sake."

Tears welled in her eyes as the lift doors opened. "I just want someone to love me for me. I need someone who I can talk to about anything. Don't you see you're that person?"

Severus stared at her in shock. He had stopped dead in front of the lift. Regaining his composure, he headed back down the hall to their room. How could she say such things to him? He was not deserving of her admiration, or her love.

They reached their suite, and he opened the door. He carried her into her bedroom and laid her on the bed. She refused to let his neck go. Pulling him close, she kissed him sloppily. A fire raged inside of Severus as the woman he wanted was now giving herself to him freely. Merlin, she was delicious. She tasted of hot chocolate. He drank her up as she attacked his mouth. He knew this wasn't real, however, so he pulled away from her. He sat down next to her, trying to keep her hands from wrapping around his neck and pulling him down again.

"Severus, kiss me again," she pleaded. "I've waited for so long."

"Do you know what that man gave you?" he asked her, trying desperately to change the subject and calm her down.

Her arms relaxed and fell to her sides. She narrowed her eyes and thought. It took three times as long as usual. Her mind was sluggish and felt as if it was full of cobwebs.

"It was probably some kind of date-rape drug," she said finally.

"Are you in danger?"

"I don't think so, unless he gave me too much. Those drugs could kill." She laughed at the thought. Propping herself into a sitting position, she gave him a wide-eyed look. "But I think I would be comatose if he had overdosed me."

"He said you wouldn't remember anything in the morning."

She looked into Severus' eyes. They were so dark. She could lose herself in the depths of them. He was so close to her. She moved her eyes down to his mouth. It was so close, she could just move a little closer... She came back to reality as he called her name. He had sounded quite flustered.

"Yeah, that's one of the side effects," she told him. "It gets the attacker off the hook, because the girl can't remember anything that happened."

"Hermione, I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."

"S'all right, Severus, I'm just glad you came." She gave him a lopsided smile, and his heart melted within him.

"You should get some rest," he told her finally.

"No! Don't go, Severus, please! Stay with me." She grabbed his arm, trying to will him to stay seated on the bed with her.

"I don't think that would be wise."

"Who cares about wise? Can't you just go with the flow for once in your life?"

Hermione sunk down in the bed. "I knew you'd be a hard nut to crack, but I didn't realize you would be impossible."

"What are you speaking of, woman?"

"This whole book search thing. I did it to get closer to you." She laughed again. "I mean, I appreciate and value your help, but I just wanted to get to know you better." She had sat up again. Now she was just an inch from his nose. "I thought that perhaps I could convince you that I would be worth spending time with."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her revelation. He didn't know whether to be happy or upset with her.

"So, this was just a ruse of yours?" he clarified.

"No, no, no, no, no! I needed your help!" she cried as she slapped him on the chest some more. "I would have never found the book without you, you know that! I just thought that, maybe... just maybe... you could... you know..." she leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "fall in love with me."

Severus fought off the temptation to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless. She already was senseless, after all. He looked at her levelly, trying to read her mind without actually doing it. Were her feelings real? Was this story true? Had she really set out to make him fall in love with her? If she had, she had succeeded fully. He needed to think, and thinking was the last thing he could do with Hermione so close to him, whispering of love. Severus stood abruptly.

"I must go. You must lie down and go to sleep. When you wake in the morning, you will feel better."

She gave him her puppy dog eyes. "I thought you were going to stay with me." She pouted up at him, widening her eyes even more.

Severus' heart melted at the sight of her, but he knew he couldn't stay. "That would not be prudent, Miss Granger. Now lie down and get some sleep."

"Well, okay," she said like a little girl.

She lay down once again, and he pulled the covers over her. He looked down at her, his face filled with emotions that he normally hid, and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. She looked up at him and gave him a beautiful smile.

"I love you, Severus," she said before she closed her eyes and passed out.

Severus stroked her cheek and finally said what he had wanted to for a long time.

"I love you too, Princess."

He stood and went through the door, closing it behind him, and retired to his own bedroom. He knew he would get little sleep tonight.

A/N: Next up: The lovebirds finally talk.

So, what do you think? They'll finally admit their feelings in the next chapter. Major thanks to Lilith Kayden for looking this over and helping to make it presentable.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 17

Hermione wakes to a blurred mind.

Chapter 14

Hermione opened her eyes and squinted as the light in the room blinded her. Where was she? She looked around and finally recognized the hotel room in which they were staying in Venice. Her mind felt foggy, and she fought to concentrate and focus her eyes on everything. She blinked a couple of times and everything came into focus. Sitting up, she wondered how she had gotten into her bed. The last thing she remembered was storming out of the hotel room and going down to the lobby. She strained to think of what happened after that. It took a long time until she could vaguely remember talking to a man. She had felt dizzy, and he had offered to take a walk with her. Fear gripped her suddenly. Why had she gone with him? And why couldn't she remember anything past that?

She wracked her brain but could not remember anything after that. Suddenly the image of arguing with the man flashed through her mind, and then it was gone. Had that really happened? Her brain was so fuzzy, she wasn't sure what was real and what wasn't.

Her stomach tied in knots as she remembered him distracting her about another customer in the café. Her attention had been drawn away long enough for him to slip something into her hot chocolate. Hermione put her head in her hands. No, it couldn't be!

While visiting her parents three months ago, she had come across an in-depth article about 'date-rape' drugs in the Muggle newspaper. There were many different types that were being used by nefarious characters so they could have their way with women. The drug would incapacitate the woman somewhat, making her more receptive to another's advances. The women wouldn't remember anything when they awoke the next day.

She sunk down into the bed and groaned. She tried and tried to remember what happened. Finally a blurry memory of Severus coming up to them when they were arguing came to her. She remembered turning and speaking to him and then passing out.

Hermione heaved a huge sigh. Severus had come along before anything horrible had happened. She sat back up and examined her clothing. She was wearing the same outfit she'd had on yesterday. She smiled to herself. Severus had been quite the gentleman, not even trying to slip her into pajamas.

oooOOOooo

Severus was sitting quietly outside Hermione's room, waiting for her to wake up. He had been waiting a while and was getting impatient. He decided to peek in on her. Opening the door slightly, he poked his head in and saw Hermione sitting up in bed. He knocked lightly to get her attention. She looked up at him and smiled. He took that as a good sign and went over and sat down next to her on the bed.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Do you remember anything about last night?"

Hermione sighed and looked down. "I remember going down to the lobby and ordering a hot chocolate. Before long I was joined by a man, and we struck up a conversation. He distracted me and made me look away from the table." Hermione was fidgeting with the blanket that covered her as she spoke. "He must have slipped something into my drink," she explained. "It made me dizzy, and he suggested we take a walk and get some air." She narrowed her eyes and tried to clear the cobwebs in her head. "I remember arguing with him about which way we should go, and he was getting a bit agitated. Then you came along. I think I passed out after that because I can't remember anything else."

Hermione looked up at Severus. "Severus, thank you for saving me last night. I shouldn't have run out like I did. I'm sorry."

Severus looked at Hermione in annoyance.

"Don't you even blame yourself for any of this, Hermione. If I hadn't been so horrible to you, you would have never left. I'm sorry I was such a prat."

Hermione wasn't sure what to say to that.

"How... how did you find me?" she asked.

"My wand directed me to you. I could feel you were in trouble."

Hermione looked at him searchingly.

"How did you feel that?"

"It's just a sense I developed while living as a Death Eater. It has saved my own life several times," Severus explained.

Hermione nodded and looked down.

"Are you alright, Hermione?"

She nodded.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

She shook her head. She looked small and vulnerable. Her eyes were wide, and she was trying to hold back tears. Severus pulled her to him and enveloped her in a hug.

"It's alright. He didn't do anything to you. I got there before he even had a chance to put his paws on you."

Hermione gave a huge sob and buried her head in Severus' shirt. She cried openly for a few minutes while Severus rubbed her back comfortingly.

"What happened after I passed out?" she asked finally, her voice muffled by his shirt.

"I Obliviated him. He'll never hurt another woman like that again."

Hermione pulled herself in closer to Severus, feeling comforted by his touch.

"I brought you back up to our room after that and put you to bed," Severus explained further.

"Thank you, Severus," Hermione said as she pulled back from him and wiped her tears. "I'm sorry I was such a problem. I hope I didn't do anything stupid last night."

"You did nothing stupid," Severus told her. "Are you hungry? I can order us some breakfast."

Hermione nodded and smiled at him.

"Get dressed, I'll meet you out there," Severus said as he pointed to the lounge.

He got up and left Hermione to get ready. She jumped in the shower and let the water course over her for a few minutes, ridding her of the worry that she had felt about the previous night. Soon she was through and stepped out, toweling herself off. All of a sudden, she felt a bit lightheaded. She braced herself against the wall as the room spun and finally settled back down around her. After a couple of minutes, she felt able to walk without falling.

Heading back out into the bedroom, she sat on the edge of her bed until she felt better. Hermione went over to her luggage. She rifled through her bag and pulled out something that made her feel feminine. Once she was dressed, she examined herself in the mirror. She had on a ribbed, red, short-sleeved shirt and tan pants. The shirt went down past her waist. She grabbed a thick black belt to accent it. Charming her hair dry, she pulled it into a high ponytail, leaving the curls to cascade down to her neck. A little lip gloss and some blush, and she was set.

She went into the lounge and found Severus sound asleep on the couch. She wondered if he had slept much the night before with all of the craziness that had happened. She went up to him, wondering if she should wake him. She looked down at his features and smiled. He looked incredibly peaceful when he slept, the worry lines that years of war had instilled in his face had virtually disappeared.

The anger she had felt towards him the night before melted away. He had saved her last night and had been so sweet this morning with her... she couldn't hold his nasty words against him.

He stirred as she watched him, and she decided to awaken him. She knelt down next to him and shook his shoulder lightly.

"Severus?"

Severus cracked his eyes open, then he opened them wide.

"Is everything alright?" he asked with worry.

She smiled at him. "Yes, everything's fine. You fell asleep."

Severus sat up and shook the cobwebs from his mind. "Indeed I did."

At that point there was a knock on the door. Room Service had arrived with their breakfast. Severus told the server to set up everything on the balcony. Soon they were seated outside, feasting on eggs, bacon, and toast. Severus eyed Hermione, watching her for a mental collapse of some kind, but she seemed normal enough.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked again.

"I'm fine," she told him. "I felt a little lightheaded after my shower, but I'm okay now." She shuddered and continued. "Even though I know nothing happened, I can't help but feel violated."

"Your feelings are quite normal, Hermione. He tried to take advantage of you."

Hermione looked up to the sky, trying to chase away the tears that were beginning to form. "I just don't understand that mentality. Why would anyone want to take advantage of another person like that?"

"I assume it's a power thing," Severus mused. "Some people get their kicks out of seeing others at their mercy. We've both dealt with people like that before."

Hermione nodded and looked down at her plate. "I just feel very exposed," she admitted. "With all of my magic, I was still helpless to do anything about his advances." She looked up at Severus. "That's a very frightening place to be."

Severus reached out and placed his hand on hers. "It's over now, and nothing bad happened. You're safe and unharmed. At least you can be thankful for that." He rubbed little circles on the back of her hand. "You'll be alright, these feelings will pass."

Hermione nodded and sniffled. "Yes, they will. I'm lucky nothing worse happened. Severus, I can't tell you how grateful I am that you came along when you did."

Severus squeezed her hand before pulling away. "I am too."

Severus kept eyeing her throughout the remainder of their breakfast. Hermione began to feel self-conscious about the way he was watching her like a hawk. She spread jelly on another piece of toast, not making eye contact with him.

Soon they had eaten their fill and moved back into the main room. Severus looked over at Hermione nervously. She gave him a quizzical look. He guided her to the couch, and they both sat down. Turning to her, he rested his arm on the back of the couch and made himself comfortable.

"Hermione, I need to ask you a question," he said tentatively.

"What is it?" Hermione asked with interest.

"It's about some things you said last night."

Hermione's face fell. Now what had happened? Had she said something stupid? Something hateful? What had she done?

"Okay," she said hesitantly.

Severus looked down, avoiding her gaze.

"You asked me why I never kissed you."

Hermione stared at Severus with a look of dread. Merlin, no! Had she told him how she felt? Not now! Not when just last night, he had made it perfectly clear that he felt nothing for her. Her mouth was suddenly dry, and she couldn't say a word. Severus still looked down at the couch and did not see her discomfort.

"You then said something about asking me to help you with the book search to get to know me better."

Hermione's shoulders sagged, and she put her head in her hands. Severus glanced over at her. He couldn't tell what her reaction meant. He decided to press on nonetheless.

"You said that you wanted me to fall in love with you."

Hermione groaned into her hands and murmured an expletive. Severus couldn't help but smirk.

"I wanted to let you know that if that was your true intention... you succeeded."

Severus waited, his breath held. She would either react badly, or she would tell him that falling in love was what she'd had in mind all along.

Hermione didn't think she'd heard him correctly. She raised her head and looked at him quizzically.

"You... did you say... what did you just say?" Her curious expression changed to one of hope.

Severus smiled, for he could tell by the look on her face that she had been sincere the night before. Now he was sure her delusional ranting had been the truth. His insecurities about her feelings for him disappeared. He moved right next to her.

"I said I love you."

She took in a deep breath, startled at his admission. "Oh!" Hermione gasped and threw her arms around him.

Severus' arms encircled her, and his lips met hers tentatively. He felt her respond to him and grew bold, intensifying the kiss and the passion behind it. Hermione opened her mouth in response to him, and he slipped his tongue into it. Their tongues danced with their new found passion, and they both reveled in the taste of each other. At long last they separated and looked into one another's eyes.

"I don't understand something," Hermione told him as she played with his hair. "You were just screaming at me last night. Why the sudden change?"

Severus looked down sheepishly. "I'm sorry about that, Hermione. I was struggling with my feelings." He looked back up into her eyes. "I found that I cared about you much more than I was willing to admit. When I finally did admit it to myself, I saw no future whatsoever in it."

Severus stopped for a moment and swallowed hard. He looked down to the ground again. Hermione waited patiently for him to continue. "I couldn't see someone like you ever wanting someone like me. I was feeling sorry for myself."

He closed his eyes and sighed. Opening them again, he focused over her shoulder, trying to look anywhere but at Hermione. "I lost control of my emotions, and I'm sorry about that. In my self-deprecating mood, I took my anger out on you. I couldn't bear the thought of going about my life without you in it. I didn't feel that you could ever return my feelings. I didn't know what you could ever see in me."

"Severus," Hermione called to him. His eyes finally met hers once again as she placed her hands around his face. "I see my future in you."

Severus gave her a shy grin before pulling her close and kissing her again. He couldn't believe that he was kissing her. Just yesterday he had been steeling himself for their separation. Now they were in each other's arms, sharing their feelings for one another. She wanted to share a future with him. He could barely fathom it, yet it was all he wanted now. The only future he could see for himself was centered on Hermione Granger. His hand tangled itself in her hair as he reveled in her affection. Her kiss was even better than he had imagined. It was filled with promise. It was heaven.

"Hermione," he said after they had pulled away from each other again. "Thank you."

He took his hand and caressed her face, kissing her again before continuing. "You pulled me out of my seclusion to find you. I don't think anyone else would have been brave enough to face me."

"You forget that Hermione Granger always gets what she wants." Hermione gave him a huge grin.

Severus caressed her hair. "I, however, am not used to getting what I want."

"You'll have to get used to it, then," Hermione murmured before kissing him again.

oooOOooo

A while later they were still entwined together on the couch.

"Do you want to head back to England now, or is there more you would like to see?" Severus asked Hermione.

Hermione pulled back and looked at him tentatively. "I would, if you wouldn't mind, like to take another Gondola ride."

Severus smirked at her. "That sounds like a good idea."

He rose and helped her up. As Hermione stood, a wave of dizziness enveloped her again. She stumbled to the side, and Severus caught her.

"Are you alright?" he asked with concern.

She nodded her head after a moment of stabilization. "I am. I think it's just the after effects of the drug."

Severus pulled her to him and embraced her. "I should have killed that bastard."

"He wasn't worth it, Severus," she contested.

"He was going to hurt you. I will never let anyone do that."

Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "My knight in shining armor."

"My beautiful princess."

Somehow her smile grew wider. She pulled his head down and covered him in kisses.

oooOOOooo

At long last, they were once again seated in a Gondola with a gondolier singing love songs while they floated along the canals. This time, however, they paid much less attention to the scenery around them. They could not take their eyes off each other. Hermione and Severus looked at each other and marveled that they had finally gotten what they wanted. They cuddled together and kissed as if they couldn't get enough of one another. Severus played with Hermione's fingers as she made to hold his hand. He looked over to her and saw her love for him shining in her eyes.

"Severus, I love you," she said with a sigh.

"Thank you for that, Hermione," he muttered softly. "I love you too." Not able to bear being separated from her lips any longer, he closed the distance and kissed her passionately. His heart was so full it felt as if it would explode in his chest. How had he ever survived without her?

A/N: Next up: Hermione tells her friends of her new relationship.

Many thanks to Lilith Kayden for her beta work.

I'm sure you're all saying FINALLY! It only took 14 chapters. Hermione is pretty good at this game she's been playing. She accomplished her goal without even realizing it! Thanks, everyone, for your wonderful comments and support of this story.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 17

Hermione presents the book to Cecil.

Chapter 15

They had returned home that evening, and the next day Hermione went to deliver the book to Cecil Nottingham. As she approached the large black gate that was the entry to his mansion, she marveled at the beauty of the home. The mansion was made of grey stone and was two stories high. The entry had a large rotunda with great grey columns surrounding it in a half circle. The mansion and grounds took up almost half a city block.

Hermione pressed the lion's head that was on the gate.

"Yes?" came a voice from the lion's head.

"This is Hermione Granger. I have the item that Mr. Nottingham requested a little while ago."

There was a pause and then the gate swung open. Hermione made her way to the entry and was surprised to see Cecil himself there to greet her instead of his house-elf.

"Hermione! Can it possibly be that you have found it?" he exclaimed at the sight of Hermione carrying a large tome.

She smiled at him. "It took some time, but I finally did find it, sir."

Cecil glowered at her. "What did I tell you about using my name, Missy?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow at him. "Cecil, then," she continued as she held the book out to him.

He motioned for her to come in and sit in the parlor. They both took seats on a white couch that stood in front of a fireplace. A beautiful dark wood framed the couch, which gave it a regal elegance. Cecil extended his hands and took the book reverently, caressing the cover as he did so.

"I never thought it would actually exist!" he marveled as he continued to examine the book.

He opened it and gingerly turned some of the pages, taking in everything the book had to offer. At some length he looked up to Hermione.

"However did you find it?" he asked her.

"It was quite difficult, Cecil. I had some invaluable help, though. Severus Snape helped me track this down. It seems he is a direct descendant of Barnaby Sutton. He had his personal diary, and from there we were able to find this. It was in a home once owned by Holt in Venice." She continued to explain their adventure, including their run in with Horatio Holt's ghost.

Cecil stared at Hermione in amazement as she told the tale. He was astounded at the journey it had taken to get the book. His thoughts were brought back to a time long ago when he and Severus Snape had been quite close.

"You say that Severus Snape helped you with this?" Cecil reiterated.

"Yes, he was essential in finding this book," Hermione remarked.

"Severus and I go way back," Cecil mused. "We used to be like father and son."

Hermione's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Really?"

Cecil nodded and smiled. He motioned to himself. "I taught him everything he knows!"

"He was your apprentice?" Hermione asked in wonder.

Cecil's eyebrows rose, and his face was filled with delight. "Ah, yes, and there has never been one better than he. We became fast friends, and he often came to me for advice with items he was working on."

Hermione sat back in her chair and folded her arms. "I wonder why Severus never mentioned that to me when I approached him to ask for help."

Cecil looked down and frowned. "We parted ways angrily. When You-Know-Who was defeated the first time, I thought Severus would change his ways. When Voldemort returned from the dead, I found out that Severus had picked up where he had left off as a Death Eater. I tried to dissuade him from such folly, but he wouldn't listen. The disagreement turned bitter. He stormed out of my home, and we haven't spoken since."

"Surely, Cecil, you know now that Severus was on our side the whole time."

Cecil nodded his head. "Of course I do, but the damage was already done. After years of separation, I was too proud to approach him, as was he, probably."

"Well, that's terrible. Do you think he would want to see you?"

Cecil shrugged. "I doubt it. I wouldn't mind seeing him, though. Maybe you can express that sentiment to him when you see him again."

"I will, Cecil. I'll tell him you're thankful for what he did and wouldn't mind if he stopped by for a visit."

Cecil nodded. "It seems that without Severus Snape's help, we would still be searching for this book," he remarked absently as he stared at the large tome.

Hermione nodded her head. "I know Holt's ghost would not have let us have this if Severus hadn't been a Potions master. Holt was adamant that this book not be used for evil purposes and made Severus swear to keep it safe."

Cecil looked up at Hermione. "I would like to reward Severus in some way. Do you have any idea what he might like?"

Hermione thought it over for a moment and then told Cecil tentatively what might be appreciated by Severus.

oooOOooo

Hermione burst through the door to Severus' cottage with a parcel in her hands.

"Guess what?" she exclaimed.

Severus looked at her, not being able to control his smile. "What?"

"Cecil wanted to give you a gift for helping me find *The Potions of our Time*."

"That is not necessary," he assured her.

She dropped the large wrapped box onto the couch next to him. "Nonetheless, he insisted."

Severus looked up at her and back down to the box.

"What is it?"

"Open it!" Hermione urged.

He tore the paper from the box and lifted the lid. Inside the box was a copy of *The Potions of our Time*. Severus looked at Hermione incredulously.

"He made a copy of it for you," Hermione explained. "Everything is intact. I told him you had spent hours going over it, and he said you would appreciate everything in the book as much as he would."

Severus lifted the copy reverently out of the box and stroked the dark green spine. He cracked it open and looked through the pages. The only difference with the book was that, instead of looking ancient, it looked brand new. He looked up at Hermione gratefully.

"Thank you, Hermione. I will treasure this forever."

"He also said that he wouldn't mind if you stopped by for a visit," Hermione explained.

Severus sighed. "I don't think that would be prudent."

"I think he wants to see you."

Memories filled Severus' head. His relationship with Cecil Nottingham had been a close one. Severus had looked upon the old wizard as the father he would have liked to have. Of all the people in the world, this one man had never made demands on him like all of his other associates. That was why he had gotten so angry when Cecil had demanded that he turn from the Death Eaters. The unassuming man had never before asked him for anything, but the thing Cecil had demanded the night that they had parted had been the one thing he had not been able to give.

"I don't think he truly does, Hermione."

Hermione sat down next to Severus on the couch. "Severus, he told me that you were his apprentice and of your falling out. I think he truly feels guilty for the way you both parted."

"It's been too long, there's nothing of our friendship left."

Hermione placed a hand on Severus' shoulder. "It's never too late to start over, love."

Severus gazed at her for a while, mulling everything over in his head. "Maybe you're right," he acquiesced.

Squeezing his shoulder, she kissed his cheek. "Of course I'm right. I'm a know-it-all, remember?"

"You keep reminding me," he murmured before he turned his head and gave her a sultry kiss. His hand caressed her brown, curly locks, and he felt whole again.

oooOOooo

Hermione knocked on the door at Grimmauld Place and waited patiently for it to be opened. Smiling brightly as Ginny opened the door, she entered and put her coat on the rack next to the entryway. Ginny gave her a hug as they headed into the kitchen.

"Where have you been, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, I've been on the trail of a lost book, and I haven't really had a minute to spare."

"Did you find the book?"

"I take it you haven't seen the *Prophet* this morning?" Hermione answered as she handed the paper over to Ginny.

Hermione entered the kitchen, leaving Ginny reading behind her. Both Harry and Ron were sitting at the table looking over copies of an official looking document that was obviously from the Ministry. Ron looked up and saw Hermione enter. He flashed a smile at her. Harry turned and smiled too. Hermione hugged the both of them and settled herself at the table next to Ron. Ginny absently sat down next to Harry.

"Wow, that's an old book you found!" Ginny exclaimed.

"It is. It's full of potions that have long been forgotten. It's already making a buzz among Potions masters, and Mr. Nottingham has even been contacted by the Ministry."

Ginny looked up at Hermione curiously. "You worked with Snape?"

Hermione nodded.

"Oi! I thought he was dead!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Just because a bloke hasn't been seen for a while, Ron, doesn't mean he's dead."

Hermione nodded. "I looked him up for help. He wound up being invaluable."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "Surely you could have found it without having to put yourself through whatever insults he must have thrown at you, Hermione."

"I'll admit, he was a bit rough at first, but he calmed down considerably."

"The things you put yourself through for your job, Hermione!" Ron exclaimed.

Hermione rolled her eyes and changed the subject. "I'm glad you're here, Ron, I have something to tell all of you."

Her three friends looked at her curiously. Harry folded his hands in front of him, Ginny arched her eyebrows again, and Ron sat back and got comfortable. Hermione looked at the three of them tentatively. She was unsure of what their reactions would be to her new relationship.

"Well, you see, Severus and I..."

"Severus! When did you start calling him that?" Harry asked.

Ginny looked to Harry sourly. "For heaven's sake, Harry, they were working together."

Harry scowled. "I can't believe you would voluntarily subject yourself to his company," he murmured.

"Anyway," Hermione continued as if nothing was amiss. "Severus and I became quite close while working on the quest together."

Ron put his head in his hands. "No, don't say it! Just don't say it."

"Don't say what, Ronald?" Hermione asked.

"You're dating him, aren't you? You're dating that nasty, foul man who used to demean you for the fun of it."

"Ron, he's not like that anymore."

"Hermione, you said yourself that he was a bit rough," Ron retorted. "That means he was rude to you still. Why, Hermione? What happened to Pierre? I thought you liked him."

Hermione looked down. "Ron, Pierre was a pompous idiot who did nothing but talk about himself. It just didn't work."

"Well," Ron exclaimed, now grasping at straws. "I'll find someone who isn't full of himself... anyone. Good grief, I'll set you up with Malfoy, just don't get yourself involved with that greasy, nasty git."

"His hygiene is better now that the war is over," Hermione muttered.

"Hermione," Harry said with concern. "What is this all about? Why on earth would you ever want to date Snape?"

Hermione sighed and looked down at the table. Ginny's eyes grew wide with understanding.

"Oh, my gosh, Hermione, you love him!" she cried.

Hermione looked up at Ginny with determination. "You're right, Ginny, I do love him. I have been attracted to him for years, and I decided to do something about it. Actually, Ron, I have you to thank for it. If you hadn't set me up with Pierre, I might not have done anything about my attraction to Severus. But as it was, I was fed up with shallow men trying to get their pictures taken with me on their arm." She sat back and crossed her arms. "You guys know me. You know that's not what I want out of a relationship."

"You want someone that you can curl up with and read books," Ginny said.

Hermione looked to her and pointed. "That's it exactly! Who do you know that would be interested in that other than Severus Snape?"

"Hermione," Harry interjected, "you can't just make a relationship based on a love of reading."

"I'm not, Harry."

"That's what it seems like."

Hermione sighed. "Harry, he's brilliant. He's sarcastic. He's good looking."

Ron spat out his mouthful of pumpkin juice at that. Hermione glared at him, and he coughed but said nothing, his face beet red.

"Did he Imperius you or something?" Harry asked angrily.

Hermione felt her control slipping away. She had known Harry would say that. It had been the reason she hadn't said a word to him about her plot to reel in Snape.

"Harry, he did not Imperius me. How dare you even insinuate such a thing?"

"Look at it from my perspective, Hermione. You come waltzing in here exclaiming that you love Snape and that he's handsome! If I said that about Pansy Parkinson, you'd have me in St. Mungo's so fast, my head would be spinning."

Hermione couldn't help herself. She had to giggle a little bit at the comparison.

"I see your point," she admitted. Heaving a great sigh, she continued. "I know this must be really hard for you guys to hear, especially since it's quite out of the blue. But I assure you, I know what I'm doing, and I know what I want. Severus has been nothing but wonderful to me since we officially got together."

"And how long has that been?" Ginny asked.

"A week."

Harry and Ron both got up and started pacing. Ginny shrugged her shoulders at Hermione in exasperation.

"A week?! A week?! He's been nice for a week?!" Harry cried. "Well, bonny good show for him! He controlled his temper for a week. What happens next week, when he screams at you for not putting the cap on the sugar bowl? He's a loose canon, Hermione. He'll hurt you."

"Harry's right!" Ron exclaimed as he waved his arms around. "He's going to disrespect you, Hermione. He's nasty and doesn't know how to be any other way."

"All I ask is that you give us a chance," Hermione begged. "Give him a chance. You are all my best friends. I don't want to have to keep away from any of you because you disapprove of my choice of men."

"Hermione, we would never treat you badly like that!" Ginny cried.

"Yeah, Hermione, we love you and all," Ron said as he sat back down beside her and put his arm around her.

"We're not saying that we like this one bit," Harry said as he too sat down and calmed himself, "but we would never ostracize you for being in love. We're just worried about the way he'll treat you."

"Well," Hermione said as she looked at each of them. "If he treats me well, do you think that sometime in the future you could come to accept him?"

The other three looked down at the table. Ginny was the first to make eye contact with Hermione again.

"If he makes you happy, Hermione, who are we to say that it's wrong. I can accept him if he's kind to you."

Harry looked up then. "Me too."

Ron was the last. He gave her a sideways glance. "You're sure you'd rather not go back with Pierre? Or me! I'm available."

Hermione scowled at him. "I don't think Lavender would appreciate that very much."

"Oh, yeah," he said sheepishly.

"Please, Ron, give him a chance."

Ron looked down at the table grumpily. "Alright, Hermione, I will for you. But I swear... if he makes just one tear fall down your face, he will find himself incapable of siring children... among other things."

Hermione threw her arms around Ron. "Thank you!" she cried.

Ron patted her on the back. "Just be careful," he advised. "I don't want you hurt."

Hermione pulled back from him. "I know what I'm doing, Ron. I understand his mood swings. He doesn't intimidate me like he did when we were kids."

"Are you sure this is what you want, Hermione?" Ron asked, hoping against hope that she would change her mind right then and there.

"Ron, I've never wanted anything so much in my entire life."

Ron shook his head. "You're hopeless, you know that?" he teased.

Hermione looked to her three friends with affection. "And that's why you all love me so much."

The four of them laughed and joked together for quite some time after that.

oooOOOooo

Severus stood tentatively outside the Nottingham manor gates for at least fifteen minutes before pushing the lion's head to announce his presence. He chastised himself for fidgeting while he waited for a response. Fidgeting was definitely not something that Severus Snape did...at least, not often.

"Yes," a voice rang out from the lion.

"I am here to see Master Nottingham. It's Severus Snape."

"One moment."

After a short wait, the gate swung open on its own, and Severus made his way to the door. A house-elf met him and showed him into the study where Cecil was awaiting him. Cecil stood when he caught sight of Severus and ambled over as quickly as his cane would allow.

"Severus, I'm glad you came," he said eagerly.

Severus nodded to Cecil. Cecil ushered him over to an armchair and motioned for him to sit down.

"You look the same as when we last saw each other," Cecil mused as he lowered himself into the chair facing Severus.

"As do you, Master Nottingham."

Cecil frowned. "Please, Severus. Let's throw away the titles and just be ourselves. I... regret the way we last parted. I've regretted it since the minute you stormed out of here. I'm sorry I doubted you, my boy. I should have known better."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "I would have thought that you had."

Cecil looked to his lap. "I reacted out of fear, Severus. I feared for your future, I feared for what you would become, and I feared that you would be killed in the process." He held his hand to his chest. "When I found out that you had almost been killed, I nearly had a heart attack."

Severus smirked. "You were just excited that you would once again be the number one Potions master in all the world."

Cecil chuckled lightly and hazarded a glance up at Severus. Severus caught the tentative gaze and became serious again.

"I wanted to tell you all of it, but I couldn't," he explained. "I had to protect the Order and my cover. I left that day angry and dejected, knowing I had lost the only true friend I have ever had."

Cecil's eyes suddenly took on a misty quality. "I too was bereft at losing the only son I ever had."

Severus stared at Cecil and marveled at his words. He felt his emotions slipping away from him and pulled them back. It would not do to be so vulnerable. He watched Cecil as the old wizard got up and came over to his chair, stooping down to be eye level with Severus.

"I was never more proud when the truth came out, my boy. You were smashing. I thought to myself as I read the *Prophet* article, *That's my boy, that's my Severus. He saved our world.*"

Severus was close to breaking down. The words of his mentor and friend were almost too much to believe true. He snorted to control himself. "I did no such thing," he whispered.

Cecil grumbled. "Oh, yes, you did, my boy." He tentatively reached out and placed an old withered hand on Severus' hair and stroked it. "I'm sorry I let you down, son. I won't ever doubt you again. You will always be my son, even if you choose to never speak to me again."

Something inside Severus snapped. Between all of the affection he had been showing Hermione and this emotionally charged conversation, he could take no more. A single tear fell from his left eye.

"Thank you, Cecil," he rasped.

Cecil pulled him toward himself and embraced him. Severus wrapped his own arms around the older man and hugged him like a lifeline. After some time, the two pulled apart.

"Now, young man, what is going on between you and my favorite book seller?" Cecil asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Severus barked out a laugh and began to tell Cecil of his relationship with Hermione.

A/N: Next up: A very important date.

Thank you, Lilith Kayden, for looking this over, and for the idea to expand Cecil's role with Severus. Thank you, dear readers, for taking the time out of your busy day to spend a few minutes with this story. Only two more chapters left!

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 17

A very special date.

Chapter 16

Severus Snape waltzed towards Gringotts...a man with a purpose. He wore midnight blue robes, similar to his black ones, but with no cape. His eyes were covered with his dark sunglasses, and his hair was tied back. *No one is giving me a second glance*, he thought. *The perfect disguise...*

As he made his way up to a goblin, he reflected on the past several months. Hermione and he had only gotten closer in that time. *I can't believe that she sees something in me and actually wants to be with me. How did I manage to trick her into caring for me? I know I'm difficult, but she overlooks all of my bad points and still cares for me. Who would have thought that I, Severus Snape, would wind up to be so lucky? I thought I was destined to live a life of loneliness and misery, but she changed all of that. She makes me ecstatic every time I see her. Who could have imagined that I could feel this good for this long? For any amount of time, actually.*

He reflected on his previous romantic obsession. His pining for Lily Evans had not been love, it had been longing. It was too bad he had enveloped himself in it for so long, but he'd had no choice. He had loved her, after all, a long time ago. Ultimately, he had been tied to her through her son and through the protection he had promised him. Then his guilt at her death had chained him to her in a way that was unhealthy. Finally he felt free, not only of the guilt, but of his tethering to Lily Evans. It had happened slowly after Voldemort had been defeated. He had felt as if all of the angst he had felt about Lily had been lifted from him. Then he seemed to think of her less and less. If he were to be totally honest with himself, he would have to admit that he still felt something for Lily. They had been best friends for years, after all, but it was now more of a warm feeling of friendship and sadness at her loss instead of the intense feelings of longing and guilt he had felt before. It had taken an inordinate amount of time, but Severus Snape had finally realized that Lily Evans was not the one for him, nor did he love her as he had thought.

What he had now with Hermione was so much better. She truly loved him and appreciated him. He still marveled at it. She had said that he was the only one with whom she could hold a decent conversation. He had told her much the same. Most other women turned him off with their constant batting of the eyelashes and empty heads. Hermione was not like that. She was beautiful, of course, but there were brains behind the beauty. Never in his life would he have thought that the bushy-haired know-it-all of his teaching days would turn into this beautiful woman who complemented him so well.

Severus came back to the present as he suddenly found himself staring into a goblin's scowling face.

"I need access to my vault," he told the goblin.

The large eared creature looked Severus up and down. "Severus Snape?" he said in amazement.

"Yes."

"May I see your wand, please?" the goblin said in clipped tones.

Severus handed him his wand, which was examined and handed back. The goblin didn't say another word as he walked towards the back of the bank, motioning for Severus to follow. Soon Severus was being whisked through the labyrinth of vaults in a small cart. In a matter of moments, the cart had wound its way to Severus' vault. He eyed the door. It wasn't a large vault, nor was it down in the depths of the bank, but it was his vault.

He watched the goblin go up to the side of the door and place a key into the lock. Severus did the same on the opposite side of the door, inserting his own key. The goblin counted to three, and they both turned their keys to the right. There was a sliding sound as the bar locking the vault slid aside. Severus pushed the door open and entered.

He had never been rich, but had always had a small amount of savings. Since the end of the war, he had sold quite a few potions, even supplying the Ministry with a few. He was also the chief supplier of Wolfsbane potion in the country. He worked under a pseudonym, of course. St. Mungos was deeply in debt to Sylvester (Sly) DeVille for his ability to produce a highly effective potion at a low price, making the Wolfsbane available to all who needed it.

The popularity of his work and the ability to help those in need had given Severus a bit of gratification at being able to help so many, even though they had no idea that it was him who indeed was helping them. These worthwhile ventures had helped him to acquire an even greater amount to fall back on, if needed. He eyed the Galleons that were piled into wooden boxes. He certainly had enough to support a family for many years, whether he worked or not.

He placed a handful of Galleons into a small pouch hanging from his belt and went over to a shelf that ran the entire length of the vault. He walked along it until he came to a flat box. He pulled the box from the shelf and opened it. Inside was a necklace which was a family heirloom and was unlike any he had ever seen before. It was made of gold and was in the shape of a snake. The snake's body circled around, forming the necklace's shape. The head of the snake hooked into the curled tip of the snake's tail, the whole piece forming a circlet that would adorn the neckline with the head pointing downward when worn. The body of the snake was formed by a solid inlaid stone within the gold. It shone a dark green with the gold making a thin outline around it. There were two small black stones in the head of the snake, and a small ruby tongue slithered out of its mouth. He smiled down at the ancient heirloom. Even though it was a snake, he hoped Hermione would like it.

He reached for a much smaller box. This was a more traditional piece of jewelry that he hoped she would wear proudly. He pocketed the small box without opening it and put the necklace into his pocket also. With that, he left the vault and was shuttled back to the entrance way of the bank.

oooOOOooo

Severus knocked on Hermione's door. Hermione opened it with a smile and looked a bit surprised when Severus took her in his arms right in the doorway and kissed her passionately. After they had pulled away from each other, Hermione raised her eyebrows at him as he smiled at her wolfishly.

"Hello, my dear," he said huskily to her.

"You're in an awfully seductive mood tonight, Severus," Hermione remarked.

"I'm just happy to see you," he declared as he kissed her neck.

"You're a bit early, aren't you?"

"I've taken the liberty to change our plans. Are you ready to go?"

They originally were going to have a quiet dinner at a nearby café on Diagon Alley, but now Hermione had no idea what was to be happening.

Hermione frowned. "Where are we going then?"

"You'll see."

With that, he took her hand and led her out of the house as she closed her door. He fished in his pocket for a minute and pulled out a broken monocle. He extended it to her and motioned for her to touch it.

"A Portkey?" she asked as she placed her finger on the monocle.

Severus smirked as they both felt the pull of the Portkey and soon were spinning away from the side street near Diagon Alley. They appeared on a different side street in Venice, close to where they had taken their Gondola rides. Hermione gasped.

"You brought us back to Venice?" she exclaimed.

"I had a strong desire to take a Gondola ride."

Hermione laughed. Severus grasped her hand and led her down the street to a waiting Gondola. Helping her get settled, he sat down next to her and pulled her close. Hermione looked at Severus with a look of amazement.

"You're a closet romantic, aren't you?" she said in awe.

"Romantic? This has nothing to do with romance. I just like the boat ride."

"Oh," Hermione said, not sure whether to believe him and be disappointed or to laugh at him for joking.

He was really confusing her right now. They had enjoyed the last few months with each other, mostly spending time with one another in one or the other's flats. He had not been one to sweep her out of her home for an unplanned excursion. His reclusive ways had precluded that. She wondered if this really was Severus Snape sitting next to her or some Polyjuiced charlatan trying to pull a fast one on her. As if reading her mind, Severus gave her a penetrating glance.

"Don't women like surprises?" he asked sulkily.

Hermione wanted to laugh at his moping, but she didn't dare. He had obviously planned this little outing rather carefully. She placed her hand on his cheek and drew his face close to hers.

"I, for one, love surprises," she said before placing a tender kiss on his lips.

oooOOOooo

Severus responded by drawing her closer and wrapping his arms around her. Her lips were like heaven. He pressed into them and snaked his tongue into her mouth, reveling in her taste. By the time they finally pulled apart, the Gondola had been coursing down the canal for quite some time, and the Gondolier had sung a couple of songs. Severus looked into Hermione's eyes. A wave of excitement went through his body at the sight of her. He couldn't remember a time when he had felt so close to a person. He never wanted to let her go. Watching her as she smiled at him, he felt his heart brighten. It had been clenching worriedly along with his stomach at his spontaneity, but her smile sent all of his fears away.

"I have something for you," he told her finally.

Hermione smiled at him as he pulled a tiny, flat, rectangular box out of his robes. With a covert swish of his wand, the box turned to its normal size. Hermione took it and looked down at it.

"Severus, you didn't need to get me anything, really."

"I want you to have this," he told her. "It has been in my family for generations. It can be traced back to Barnaby Sutton and his family."

Hermione looked to Severus with wonder. "Really?" she exclaimed. Then she became concerned. "Severus, I can't accept this if it has been a part of your family for this long!"

Severus scowled at her. "I wouldn't offer it to you if I didn't want you to have it. Will you open it or not?"

Hermione stared at Severus tentatively. *What could such a treasured gift mean?* she thought to herself.

Finally, she nodded and lifted the lid on the box. Inside was a necklace that was shaped like a snake. Hermione inhaled sharply.

"Oh, Severus, this is magnificent."

Carefully, Severus pulled the preformed circlet from the box. He pulled at the snake head to open the necklace and placed it around her neck. He fastened the head back through the tail and sat back to look at it.

"Do you have a mirror?" Hermione asked.

oooOOOooo

Severus glanced at the gondolier, who was looking ahead, and transfigured the necklace box into a mirror. Hermione admired the necklace. Her breath hitched within her as she gazed upon it. She had never seen something so beautiful in all of her life. The green head of the snake hung down about an inch from the rest of the necklace and glittered in the sunlight. She could not believe that Severus had given her so precious a gift.

"This necklace is charmed to turn any color you wish," Severus explained. "It can match with anything you put on. Given your vast wardrobe, I thought it might do well to give you something versatile. You just need to think of what color you would like it to be and touch the head."

Hermione smiled at Severus and then tried out the charm. She changed the snake to a brilliant deep purple, then blue, yellow, and finally back to green. She lowered the mirror and looked back to Severus with tears in her eyes.

"Thank you, Severus. It truly is remarkable."

"You really like it? I was concerned that you wouldn't want to wear something so obviously Slytherin in design."

Hermione pulled him to her and hugged him furiously.

"I would proudly wear anything you gave me, Severus. I really love it."

"Well, then, maybe you wouldn't mind wearing one more thing that I have for you?" he asked.

oooOOOooo

His heart hammered in his chest as she pulled away with a curious look on her face. Merlin, was this the right thing to do? Would she laugh in his face at his proposal? He was having serious second thoughts. It was too late to stop now, however, as he had already told her he had something else for her. Maybe he could conjure up a flower or something?

No! He was not going to shrink away from the one thing that would make him the happiest man alive. He dug into his pocket again and pulled the smaller box out of it. Hermione's eyes grew wide as she saw the ring box in his hand. Severus stared down at it for a few seconds, gathering his courage. With a sigh, he opened the box and presented her with the most beautiful ring she had ever seen.

"Hermione Granger, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

oooOOOooo

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. She looked at Severus, whose face was ashen and lips were drawn tight. She looked down at the ring. Oh, it was beautiful. An oval blue sapphire was surrounded by diamond studded bands that wrapped around the stone and then weaved themselves into a circular band. She looked back at Severus, who looked scared to death. She felt consumed with happiness. She opened her mouth to answer him and... burst into tears.

oooOOOooo

Severus frowned. He closed the box and put it into his lap while watching Hermione, who now had her head in her hands, crying her eyes out. He wasn't sure what he had expected her to do, but it certainly hadn't been this. He hadn't realized just how miserable his question would make her. He pulled her to him in bewilderment, placing his chin atop her head, and let her cry on. He felt tears well up in his eyes too, but he would not let them fall. He blinked them back quickly before Hermione could look at him again. He didn't want her to know how she had broken his heart just now.

"Yes," she whispered finally.

Severus narrowed his eyebrows in confusion. He didn't pull away. He was afraid to look into her eyes.

"Oh, yes, Severus."

Does that mean that she wants to marry me? Did she just accept my proposal? Then why is she crying miserably?

"Hermione, did you just say you would be my wife?"

She nodded under his chin.

"Why are you accepting if it is making you miserable? You need not settle for me if you don't want to."

Hermione pulled away from him and wiped her tears away. "Severus," she said as she clasped his face in her hands. "I'm not crying because I'm miserable. I'm crying because I'm happy."

"That makes no sense whatsoever!"

"You don't understand. All I have ever wanted was you... your love... you by my side. I would gladly give up everything I possess to have you love me." Tears began to flow down her cheeks again. "And you do."

Severus gave her a shy, slanted grin. "So, your tears are a good thing?"

A huge laugh escaped Hermione's lips, and she nodded to him.

"You want to be my wife?"

"More than anything!"

Severus pulled her closer again. "Good, because I love you more than anything."

oooOOOooo

His face was just centimeters from hers, his lips so close, Hermione could feel his breath on her. His closeness made her insides go weak. Just moving a hairsbreadth would press her lips to his. She longed to feel him kissing her.

Hermione smiled lovingly at him. "I love you more than anything, too."

Severus moved ever so slightly and surrounded her lips with his. She pushed into him, trying to take all of him in. She marveled that her elaborate plan had worked. She had single-handedly transformed the reclusive Severus Snape into the sexy, romantic man who was to become her husband. She couldn't believe how good her success felt.

A/N: Next up: The end of our little tale.

I hope you enjoyed that little bit of fluff. Thanks, Lilith Kayden, for looking this over and helping to make it better.

Chapter 17: Epilogue

Chapter 17 of 17

So, now what?

Epilogue

Severus stood in the bookshop, unloading a small box of potions onto the shelves. Hermione's and his life had flowed together in a most natural way after he had proposed to her. They had been married two months later in a private ceremony. A select few had been invited. Hermione's parents had attended, as had the Potters and the entire Weasley clan. Ginevra Potter had served as Hermione's Matron-of-Honor, and Cecil had been Severus' best man. Minerva had also made an appearance, smiling and twinkling like her predecessor before her, causing Severus to cringe. In retrospect, there had been too many people there.

He smiled to himself as he placed another vial on the shelf. Other than the actual ceremony and the private festivities that followed, his fondest memory of that day had come from Cecil. Before the wedding had started, Severus had been nervously pacing in his waiting room. Cecil had watched him idly for a while, then had interjected a few sighs. Finally, he had not been able to contain himself.

"Severus, what, in the name of Merlin, are you doing?" he growled.

Severus stopped pacing and turned to his friend and mentor. "I am pacing."

"To what end?"

"To the end that it keeps me from ripping my hair out!"

Cecil gave him an odd look. "Why would you do such a thing, my boy?"

"I just... hate waiting. You know that."

Cecil rose from his seat and went over to Severus. He placed a comforting hand on Severus' shoulder.

"There's no need for you to be nervous, son. Anyone who looks at her can see she's madly in love with you."

Severus glanced over at Cecil. "How she can be is the real question."

Cecil grinned at his former protégé. "Severus, you have always given yourself too little credit. I'm thankful that you have found Hermione. She truly sees you as you are, not as you picture yourself to be."

"Are you insinuating, sir, that I cannot see myself clearly?"

Cecil moved in closer to Severus and winked at him. "That's exactly what I'm insinuating. You have never seen your full merits, even when you were a youth and under my tutelage. Open your eyes, Severus. You are a wonderful man and deserve the utmost happiness."

"Cecil, I..."

Cecil squeezed Severus' shoulder. "I'm trying to tell you that you deserve this. You have lived in the shadows of Voldemort long enough with all of the misery that comes with that. It's time for you to enjoy life... to be happy and secure in who you are. Can you do that for yourself, Severus?"

"I'm not quite sure I know how," Severus admitted.

"Look to Hermione, and believe in her. She will not lie to you about yourself. Learn about who you are through her."

"You make it sound so easy, Cecil."

Cecil gave him a benevolent smile. "It is, son. You just need to open up and believe what others are telling you."

Severus looked down and nodded.

"I just want you to know that I'm happy for you and I love you, my boy," Cecil said as his eyes became misty.

Severus' voice was barely a whisper. "... you mean a great deal to me also, Cecil."

Severus found himself being hugged furiously by the older man who was like a father to him. His arms encircled Cecil as he returned the embrace, smiling a bit to himself as he did.

"Thank you, Cecil. You have given me more than you can imagine by being my friend and best man, and by giving me such worthwhile advice."

Cecil pulled back and beamed at Severus. "Son, if I can help you to see who you really are, then I have accomplished all that I need to in this life."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door as Harry Potter alerted them to the fact that everything was about to begin. Cecil patted Severus on the back as he made his way out of the room.

"This is the first day of the rest of your life, Severus, make it a good one."

Severus smiled at Cecil. "I will, my friend, I will."

oooOOOooo

Hermione had certainly brought him out of his shell. He no longer hid himself from the Wizarding population. He didn't seek their company by any means, but he didn't skulk around incognito, hoping not to be recognized. In fact, his re-emergence into the Wizarding world had come with a few benefits. These potions he was stocking were quite the rage among the Wizarding populace. Severus spent a good part of his day sequestered in his lab at their Hogsmeade cottage creating these tonics and experimenting with new ones.

Hermione had devoted a corner of her bookshop to his elixirs. *Potions of our Time* and the permission of Cecil Nottingham had given Severus the ability to make potions that had never been heard of. Each one was specifically tailored to help with a certain ailment or filled a specific need. Severus' spy work had given him a good eye, and he was able to foresee needs in the Wizarding community even before the Wizarding world knew they were in need. So, in the two years that they had been married, the bookstore had done wonderfully, thanks in part to Severus' newfound subspecialty to his career.

The bell over the door jingled, bringing Severus out of his musings. He glanced up to see his lovely wife entering the bookstore with a wide grin on her face. She quickly came up to him and threw her arms around him. Before he had a chance to say anything, she was kissing him wildly. After they broke apart, Severus looked at her curiously.

"You're quite the vixen today, my dear," he murmured as Hermione hugged him some more.

She pulled back and arched her eyebrows at him. "Can't I be glad to see my husband?" she remarked.

His arms surrounded her as he pulled her closer. "Of course you can," he assured her before kissing her back just as wantonly.

Finally they parted, glad that the store was empty so they could show their affection for each other without interruption.

"So, what did you find out?" Severus asked.

Hermione pulled away from him. "Well, the book is located in Egypt," she explained.

Severus arched an eyebrow. "I suppose it's hidden in some pyramid," he thought out loud.

"Close," Hermione said with a laugh. "It's reported to be amongst King Tut's possessions."

"How are we going to get our hands on that?" Severus asked in incredulity. "And what would Tut want with such a book?"

"Oh, Severus, it makes perfect sense. The Egyptians were obsessed with death and the afterlife. A book about communicating with the dead would intrigue them to no end."

"I suppose you're right. But how would Tutankhamen have gotten his hands on it?"

"Have you heard of his military commander, General Horemheb?" Hermione asked.

"Just in passing," Severus replied.

"He was a wizard. He was also a good friend of Xavier Holladay, author of *Talking with Ghosts*."

"So, you think Holladay gave a copy to his friend Horemheb?"

"He did. I found a letter in a biography about him. The letter was from Holladay to Horemheb. It states that he is sending a very important book to Horemheb that the Egyptian should find fascinating."

"*Talking with Ghosts*," Severus mused.

"It has to be."

Severus looked over at Hermione. "So, when do we leave?"

"I arranged for a Portkey tomorrow."

Severus pulled her into his arms again. "We've never been to Egypt together," he mused as he nuzzled her neck.

Hermione giggled at his ticklish advances. "No, we haven't. It should be a fun trip. Hopefully we can find the book and figure a way to get it out of Egypt."

"I'm sure you and your stunning intellect will have anyone who stands in our way totally befuddled."

Hermione giggled again as Severus continued to kiss her neck, moving up to her ear.

"Severus! I'm trying to be serious here!"

"You are far too serious for your own good, my love."

"Oh, Severus," she moaned. "You are making my insides tingle," Hermione admitted to him.

"How about if I made you feel more than just a tingle? How about a bath in that enormous tub you covet so much." Severus asked sultrily.

"It's the middle of the day, Severus. The shop..."

"... Can be closed. This shop has never stopped us before." His lips found hers, and he kissed her urgently. His hand played with her hair as Hermione's caressed his face. Their kisses became so demanding that they found it hard to break apart. Reluctantly, Hermione pulled away from his lips.

"I'll lock up," Hermione said breathlessly as she pulled away from him. She grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door. With a quick flick of her wand, the wards were set, and a closed sign was hanging in the window. Arm in arm, the couple rushed around the corner, headed to their flat for some fun in the tub.

"Oh, by the way," Hermione said breathlessly. "I found out today that I'm pregnant."

Severus stopped short. "You're what?"

"Pregnant, Severus. It's when two people who love each other make a baby, and it grows inside the mommy."

Severus ignored her jest. Holding his wife reverently, he put his hand on her abdomen. "You mean there's a baby in there?" He looked back up at her in wonder.

"Yes!" Hermione said with a laugh.

"My baby?"

Hermione scoffed. "Well, it isn't Neville Longbottom's!"

"Never mention Longbottom's name in association with my child again," Severus reprimanded her.

Severus knelt down right in the middle of the sidewalk and put his ear next to Hermione's midsection.

"I don't hear anything. When will I hear him?"

"You won't. He's encased in a bubble. You can probably use Legilimency when he's older, you prat."

Severus turned his head and kissed her abdomen. He pulled himself up to a standing position and cradled Hermione's face in his hands.

"You have given me everything, Hermione. You gave me your love, your life, a reason for me to exist, and now a child. I never thought I could be so happy. It's all because of you, my love. Thank you."

He pulled her to him and kissed her. This was a kiss of utter devotion. He had never felt so wonderful in his life, and it was all because of this lovely witch that was in his arms. Suddenly he pulled away. He looked nervously at his wife.

"But, if you're pregnant, then we can't... I mean... we shouldn't... What if I hurt you or the baby?"

Hermione put her hand to Severus' cheek and caressed it lightly. "Don't worry, love. The Healer at St. Mungo's said we can frolic to our hearts content without needing to worry about hurting the baby. Well, maybe she didn't say frolic."

A pure hunger filled Severus' face as he smirked at Hermione.

"Well, then what are we waiting for?" he asked in a deep, sultry voice. "Our bath awaits."

Hermione laughed, and they hurriedly continued on their way back to their house for a long needed 'soak' in the tub.

The End

A/N: Liliith Kayden, please take a bow for your beta work. This story wouldn't be what it is without your input.

A huge thanks to all of you who have followed this story to its conclusion. I have been amazed by all of you that tuned in for each update. Your comments throughout really made my day. This was truly a fun experience, and I thank Melusin for her challenge prompt which inspired it.