

Snape & Sympathy

by Ladymage Samiko

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione was bored. Excessively, exceedingly bored. And, as thousands of women before her had done when required by their partners' uninspiring efforts, she contemplated her ceiling...though hers, it must be admitted, was patterned with moving constellations, giving her something slightly more interesting to look at than plain wood or plaster. There was Leo, for example, and Taurus, and her favourite, Orion. Still, it might be a better idea to put Arithmantic equations up there; give her brain something for it to *do*.

Her lover (for lack of a better term) finished his attentions with a shout and promptly rolled off and over. Blinking at the sudden, insipid finish, Hermione realized that their relationship was finally, decidedly over. There was nothing left of the romance that had made it beautiful or...on her part, at least...the passion that had made it exciting. Perhaps she'd given it too long already, but she'd wanted to be certain that her lack of enthusiasm...both in and out of bed...wasn't some sort of slump that could be got out of after a little time and effort. After all, relationships were ups and downs, give and take, weren't they? It wasn't all roses and chocolates. *Hmm, chocolate... and marshmallows...*

But she was tired of being the one who gave all the time. However much fun *he* thought he was having, she deserved more than just counting stars for several minutes a few times a week. Magicked stars, at that. Not even real ones. Real ones might actually involve something more exciting than lying on her back on a mattress in a bedroom. She had to admit he'd never been creative, but at least he'd been spontaneous in the beginning. Now she was nothing more than a... a pressure release valve. It was somewhere between embarrassing and annoying to realize that she couldn't remember the last time *she'd* had an honest orgasm.

With that determination, Hermione got up from the bed and made her way to her shower. A sleepy voice drifted after her, saying he'd be ready for another round in a minute, but she ignored it. After all, it was a Saturday night, and fairly early yet. There must still be *something* more interesting than the ceiling to be found.

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Hermione wasn't one for clubbing of any sort...Muggle or wizard...and disinclined to let rumours fly by appearing alone in an obvious place. So after a little thought and a short walk, she slipped into a hole-in-the-wall coffee house that seemed to be having a low key open mic night. It suited her, she thought, with a mocha and a book (*Are Women Human?* by Dorothy Sayers; she needed the common sense feminism) on the table before her and the sound of not-too-awful poetry flowing over the low buzz of conversation. And this place was too... something, she'd hardly any idea what... to be fashionable, so the clientele was small and comfortable.

At least it *was* comfortable until a singular, gravelly voice ground across her consciousness. "Magistra Granger."

There was only one man who spoke that way, and the shock of hearing him nearly knocked her coffee over. "Magister Snape," she replied, recovering her composure. A shock, perhaps, but not a surprise after a moment's thought. The man possessed, after all, a positive genius for appearing precisely when he was the last person you wanted to see. It made one wonder if he had created some sort of magical radar...perhaps in the vein of a Sneakoscope?...that led him to the appropriate...people? victims? "I hardly would've expected to see you in Muggle Bath."

He shrugged. "Potions ingredients," he explained tersely. Ah, yes, that covered a multitude of sins, didn't it? And so few would be able to follow his explanations even if they bothered to ask. Well, she certainly wouldn't be bothered tonight. She'd had enough of attending to men and their concerns for a while.

But he apparently hadn't had enough of hers. "I'm aware that you live in the area, Magistra...Minerva writes of you incessantly. But I did not expect to see you here, of all places. What happened: Weasley fail to perform adequately?" Lips twisted in a knowing smirk, and that damned eyebrow quirked.

"How did you..." Hermione clamped her mouth shut, then, flushing, continued. He'd gotten the reaction he wanted and would only be more amused if she tried to prevaricate. "How did you know?" she finished, resigned.

Snape slid into the chair opposite, setting his own cup down gently. She wondered briefly what 'poison' he preferred (Americano? Earl Grey? espresso?) and how it was that he trusted anyone else to prepare it. "It is a Saturday night," he replied casually. "You are in a relationship, yet are out alone, with neither Weasley nor friends, in a venue that implies that you do not want to 'enjoy yourself' in the popular fashion. You are reading a book, the title and cover of which indicates some sort of meditation on the state of women...*not* your usual material. Feminist literature, I have noted, is more favoured when one is feeling... antagonistic... towards men."

"Excellent work, Sherlock," Hermione said drily.

"And," he continued blithely, "this afternoon was the Quidditch semi-final. I assume Weasley wished to celebrate in the custom of sports morons everywhere."

Hermione gaped, then huffed a laugh. "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you were spying on *me*. But my love life, as dismal as it is at the moment, is hardly something you'd concern yourself with especially."

"Hardly," Severus agreed, taking a long sip from his cup. "But I *have* retained the habit of... noticing things and putting the pieces together. And Weasleys tend to run to type."

"Type?" Hermione found herself more intrigued than she ought to have been...not in the Weasleys so much as the workings of Snape's mind. And in why he was being so... chatty (relatively speaking).

"Arthur, the absent-minded tinkerer." Snape traced an invisible line with his finger down the table. "Bill, the charmer. Charlie, the aura of danger. Percy, the strait-laced prude...not noticeably attractive, but some women seem to take the attitude as a challenge. I refuse to speculate on whether or not they find a 'tiger' inside or not." Hermione giggled, but sobered and blinked wide-eyed at his next comment. "You have some of the same quality yourself, with that Victorian spinster look you prefer, but your impression is entirely different; you have the look of a woman who knows very well her sexual power...and is comfortable with it...but chooses to rein it in for reasons of her own. Though I would be interested to know how you developed such confidence when your only... *known* partner has been young Weasley." His lips curled up again on one side as he glanced up at her. His eyes glittered, with what she couldn't tell. Nor could she tell if she should be offended by the implication of sleeping around.

"The twins," he returned to his 'sketch' of the family tree, "are the rogues, the mavericks. Being a ghost hasn't changed Fred in any... substantial... manner. And that leaves Ronald Weasley."

Hermione was fascinated, but beginning to seriously question the dark man's motives. "And what is Ronald Weasley?"

"Ronald is the boor," he answered, as though it should be completely obvious. "The slob. The sort of man...if that *is* his actual status, which I question...who thinks *living* is about chugging Bogsfoot ale while watching whatever form of Quidditch he can lay his hands on. *Playing* Quidditch is also valid, but only until his mid-thirties or so. And, after all the excitement, a shag to take the edge off."

Hermione regarded him closely. Was the man drunk in his own peculiar way? Should she be alarmed at either his accuracy or his talkativeness? Or at both? Her mind was spinning; she took a sip of her cooling mocha to cover her confusion. Perhaps the caffeine would add an edge to her wits. "And you?" she said finally, thinking perhaps a personal dig would uncover a Snape she was more used to dealing with. "What sort of lover are you?"

His face lifted to parallel hers. His hair was still lank after all these years, curtaining either side of his face; he could hide simply by turning his head. But his jaw had lost some of the tautness that had marked it during her school years, and his eyes no longer carried such active malice. Right now, there appeared to be confusion in them. "Me?"

"Yes, you." Hermione took another sip, drowning an odd spurt of annoyance. "You've analysed the entire male Weasley clan, for some reason; what about yourself?"

"Me..." he mused, gaze turning inward. "I haven't the foggiest, actually. Not that it's any your business, to start with."

"Well, I like that! So my love life is fair game, but yours isn't?" She glared at the man.

His hands made a dismissive gesture, and he leaned back in his chair. "I merely made an observation, Magistra. *You* provided...and requested...elucidation."

"You... you...!" He merely smirked, and Hermione stuffed her temper back inside her head. The blasted man had a point, damn him. Besides, she wouldn't be surprised if he were baiting her on purpose. Well, if he wasn't going to be forthcoming about *his*, he could damn well listen to her rant about hers, given that he'd expressed the interest already. She could use a good vent, and he was one person who...though he might toss it back in her face at some point to be determined...would never divulge the information to anyone. The last thing she needed was tales being told to Ron or Ginny or...gods forbid...Molly.

But Snape was, in his own perverse, somewhat Machiavellian way, safe as houses.

So Hermione whinged. At length. In detail...though not *too* much detail, out of respect for her audience's sex and possible sensibilities. (Though after all that time in the Death Eaters, could he still *have* any sensibilities?) Besides, there were some things he simply didn't need to know.

And through it all, Snape simply sat in silence, sipping his mystery what-not, eyes intent and expression... well, expressionless. Except, perhaps, for a tiny hint of smug satisfaction at being proven entirely correct in his analysis.

Hermione finished her catalogue of grievances, feeling quite a bit better for having articulated everything that was bothering her to someone who was actually *listening*. (Face it, Ron *never* listened unless it involved Quidditch or the threat of a horde of starlings [canaries were too bloody showy nowadays], and Ginny and Harry were *still*, irritating people] too wrapped up in each other to bother, even when one *could* separate them.) Though, *why* he was bothering to listen... Hermione repeated the question aloud.

For a moment, Snape merely watched her. "Perhaps," he began slowly, "I'm a sadistic bastard who's enjoying you realize precisely how much time you've wasted on a worthless prat. Perhaps I'm cataloguing all of these details to use in conversation with Weasley when I require verbal ammunition to puncture that vast ego of his. Or perhaps I'm madly in love with you and elated that you've finally realized how much of a prat he is. Or maybe I'm being maudlin and simply revelling in the fact that someone is willing to talk to me without being coerced."

Hermione's lips twisted wryly. "Or perhaps," she mimicked, "you simply can't be arsed to give me a straight answer."

He shrugged, but there was a gleam of amusement in his eyes. "You've been acquainted with me for more than half your life, Magistra. Were you expecting the crooked man in the crooked house to miraculously transform into something entirely different?"

A huff of laughter. "*Perhaps* not," she replied. "But after an hour of whinging about unequal and uninspiring relationships, I was *hoping* for a bit more give."

"Weasley," he drawled maddeningly, "is an incompetent prat."

"And you're oh-so-marvellous in bed?"

"I am not so insufferably egotistical as to say so, true or no." And Hermione blinked in the face of an honest grin. "But I at least *attempt* to ensure my companion has an orgasm before I fall asleep."

"I'm not sure whether, coming from you, I find that remark surreal," Hermione admitted slowly, still staring, "or inviting."

"The fact that I have actually had sex and am, indeed, an anatomically articulate member of the male species?" A lifted eyebrow and a long sip. "On your part, I imagine 'surreal' covers it quite sufficiently. There *are* people whom we never wish to think of as actual human beings."

"That's not fair!" she objected, sitting bolt upright.

He eyed her thoughtfully before conceding, "Perhaps not. You have always been singular in your dealings with me, which is why I was not... displeased to see you here tonight."

"Oh?" Hermione managed to imbue the syllable with almost as much meaning as Snape might have done.

"I am, irritatingly enough, becoming maudlin in my old age." He gazed meditatively at the dregs of dark liquid remaining in his mug. "That much *was* true, Magistra Granger; I find I have no inclination to spend today alone." His mouth twisted. "Yet I am hardly spoiled for choice in the matter of congenial company. You are one of the few people who will, in fact, talk to me, not about me or through me."

"And I will admit candidly that I *am*, in a way, enjoying your 'whinge.' It is good to know that your life is not all sunshine and roses. That *you* are, in fact, an *actual* human being."

Hermione smiled at the way he'd turned his words on himself. "And would you tell me," she asked gently, "what makes you maudlin today of all days, Magister Snape?"

Another ambiguous shrug. "A bio-chemical reaction as a result of advancing decrepitude, I imagine."

"You're hardly decrepit," Hermione countered wryly. "Oh, well. At least you aren't telling me that your biological clock is ticking."

"My biological clock is ticking."

Hermione responded to the deadpan comment with a decidedly inelegant snort. "Invalid argument!" Hermione claimed stoutly, suppressing a grin. "Contemporary society...and, in fact, societies in general...consider men viable up to and including the point when they have a stroke during sex with a big-breasted blonde sixty years their junior."

"I'll remember that if I manage to convince a blonde of any sort to occupy my bed," he replied drily, lips quirked. "They've been rather thin on the ground for years."

"Narcissa Malfoy?" Hermione said sweetly. Oh, the rumours had been rife at certain times...

"I prefer," he replied calmly, "to remain *intact*. Or have you not noticed Lucius's rather rabid possessive streak?"

"I *prefer* not to notice Lucius Malfoy in any manner whatsoever. Visually striking, yes, but a supercilious ass ninety-nine point nine percent of the time."

"True," Severus agreed. "But that point one percent does count for something. He's had his moments."

"Probably," Hermione conceded. "But I'd rather not waste my time waiting for them."

"You'd rather waste your time staring at your bedroom ceiling?"

Oh, that was sly. Hermione glared briefly, but had to admit the point. "Well, I'm not wasting it any more," she declared. "And I made that quite clear before I left the flat." Her eyes dropped to her cup, now empty. "I had to at least try, don't you see?" Somehow, she wanted Snape to understand.

"I do." His voice had changed. No longer teasing or biting; it was calm and sincere. "I envy you, Magistra Granger." He'd leaned back in his chair and his eyes were distant. "Your relationship had, at least, its ordinary chances of succeeding. Mine," he added with slight bitterness, "have always had a snowflake's chance in hell. If that."

"I thought," Hermione said gently, "you were supposed to be commiserating with *me* this evening."

"I was, wasn't I?" he replied, bemused. "I told you I was getting maudlin in my old age. Perhaps I should switch from tea to alcohol; then I would at least have an excuse." He contemplated his cup with vague disgust.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she blurted in exasperation. "We've just spent the past...what, hour, two?...discussing my personal life and the corresponding sexual details. You've had the grace to sit through a whinge about something that is extraordinarily banal and tedious and presumably of no interest to you whatsoever without taking me to task about it. And after all that, you're getting in a twist because you might *possibly* need to talk about *yourself* for a bit? Bloody hell, Snape, I think you've damned well earned the right to talk about anything you damn well please without trying to excuse yourself to yourself...or to me."

A look of blank astonishment gave way to full-bodied laughter. Though slightly surprised, Hermione thought that he had rather a nice laugh, really, a full sound that seemed to have all the richness of dark chocolate.

He quieted, but the smile stayed on his lips, a rather awkward, crooked thing that nevertheless warmed his expression. "Ever the bossy know-it-all, Magistra Granger."

She flushed slightly. "But I'm right, and you know it," she declared.

"Let your hair down," he said abruptly.

"What?" Hermione was baffled by this apparent non-sequitur.

"Let your hair down," he insisted. "I... I want to see the girl I knew, not the spinster."

She gave him a curious look, but obligingly drew out the clips that kept the large knot of hair in place. It cascaded down her shoulders and back in rampant waves and curls. Over the years, she'd given in to vanity and let it grow down to her waist...though she usually bundled it up to keep it out of her way; it was no more manageable now than it

had been for the last twenty years even with the heavy weight.

"It suits you," he said softly, "magnificent and exuberant and utterly unabashed to be what it is." Snape held her gaze as he leaned forward, his fingers touching her hair so gently that she could have mistaken the slight movement of the strands as normal gravity or a tiny draught. Her breath caught. His face, his eyes... so... not expressionless, precisely, but not willing to let what was behind them be seen. Hermione took his hand up in her own, preventing him from retreating, as she felt sure he would do. In a distant fashion, she noticed the calluses from wand use, the feel of the contours and lines of his palm, the knobs of knuckles and ropes of tendons. He did not try to tug free.

"Why?" she asked him, the low syllable demanding the candour he had so far withheld.

"You're no longer a child, Magistra." His voice was slow with what might have been wonder or regret, then firmed. "You're no longer a child. And I... I do not want to be alone."

"Why?" Slightly more demanding, though she let their hands drift to the table.

He sighed. "Today has been a day of reflection and introspection, Magistra Granger. And I find that... the past is the past, for good or ill. And the present not worth much to anyone; I've no friends nor family, no purpose to shape my days. It is an empty existence.

"It is my birthday, Magistra, and drinking my evening tea in a public place was the best I could do to mark it." He slipped his hand from hers, threw himself back in his chair with palpable force. "And all of it combines to make me a pathetic fool. Not," he added bitterly, "that I've ever been anything else."

"Come home with me," Hermione said suddenly.

His face went hard. "I will not submit myself for a pity fuck, Magistra."

"I wasn't offering one, *Magister*," she retorted coolly. "I'm not about to hop into bed with you out of pity; I've wasted enough time there through a sense of obligation. And while I'd like to test your claims as a lover, I've no desire to be accused tomorrow morning of either taking advantage or, as you say, giving you a 'pity fuck.'

"Personally, I was thinking of a mug of soup, some toasted marshmallows, a book or a film. And a place to sleep, if you like. And no," she forestalled him, "it's not out of pity, either. Again, I've spent enough time indulging male insecurities. I like your company; I'm interested in what we've started this evening. I'd like to see what happens next.

"You said," she finished, soft and earnest, "that you didn't want to be alone."

He gave her a slightly helpless look. "I don't; the gods know why." A sigh. "Another joke on their part, I imagine. I finally manage to get people to leave me in peace, and I discover some absurd social streak in my nature."

Hermione shrugged. "We're human. Herd animals. We define ourselves by our interactions with others. And I think the gods are rather fond of their little jokes."

"Well, perhaps it is best that we define each other this evening." His gaze turned speculative. "No promises, no expectations..."

"Just companionship," she promised.

"...and no Weasleys."

Hermione laughed as she stood and collected her wraps. "*Definitely* no Weasleys. If Ron is still at my flat by now, after our words earlier, he deserves whatever he gets."

Snape offered his arm in an old-fashioned gesture. "A Flopsy hex would be appropriate, I believe."

"A 'Flopsy hex?'" Hermione queried, intrigued even as she was charmed by the gentlemanly act.

A wicked smirk graced his lips. "Indeed, Magistra. A particularly *potent* threat against the male species."

Hermione's eyes brightened with comprehension and wicked glee. "I'd be particularly interested in learning the technique, Magister Snape."

"I think you're dangerous enough already," he replied absently as he easily threaded through the assembly of tables, chairs, and people. "Goodness knows what sort of havoc you'd wreak with that spell. You'd more than likely deprive the world of an entire generation of witches and wizards.

"Then again," he added as they stepped out into the cold night air, "the thought of a gaggle of morons I do *not* have to teach has its distinct merits." He helped her over an icy puddle. "I shall teach you the method tonight...*after* the marshmallows, I think; I don't want you in a mood to use the damned thing *ome*."

"Oh, no," Hermione informed him decidedly. "I have distinct hopes in that direction. You may consider yourself immune."

"That is a great weight off my mind," he assured her gravely. "And off my libido."

A frosty puff signaled her laughter. "I shouldn't have thought there was anything that truly *could* damage a man's libido." Snape didn't reply to the jest...though he didn't seem to take it amiss...and they continued on in silence. The streets were fairly quiet now; the late hour and icy patches discouraged wanderers. He appeared to trust her lead, she realized, for he made no mention of Apparating instead of walking. Instead, they listened to the soft thumps of their footsteps and distant sounds of people as they made their way homeward.

ANs:

I'd meant this piece to be two things: 1) in time for Severus's birthday, and 2) a PW(m)P (porn with minimal plot). As you can see, neither worked out quite the way I thought. *sigh* I hope it was still enjoyable, though. It was inspired by the opening scene, with Hermione in the tradition of *les Grandes Horizontales*, so to speak. (Though, being Hermione, she doesn't put up with it for long...) And Snape, with his usual snark, puts out some of my own opinions on HP characters. Though it's Snape's 50th this year, I imagine this scene to take place closer to his 45th birthday, simply because Hermione needs to be old enough to know what she's doing, but young enough to still be a little unsure. (Besides, having her put up with Ron for 10+ years strained my sense of mercy. ^_~)

'Magister' is an old academic term, used for scholars who are qualified to teach their subjects, and here used to indicate that neither of them are actually teaching.

Concrit is welcome, particularly concerning the point at which I chose to end this little one-shot. But any donations to the review box are most definitely appreciated.