

The Leather-Bound Promise

by Helena Rickman

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

A/N – This is my very first full-length story. At this time, I have it rated M(R) because I suspect there may be some mildly explicit content. As the story progresses, I may need to change the rating to MA(NC-17) if some serious sexy-time is inspired. Thanks for reading my tale!

Most importantly, do I own these characters? I wish. At best, I can only let my imagination run wild. Thanks, J.K. Rowling, you are my idol.

A/N for Prologue – There will be mention of non-consensual sex close to the end of this prologue. The warning is here – if you do not wish to read, please skip the last two paragraphs.

And please, review, review, review!

Much thanks, roses, chocolates, and pretty colored ponies to *Dreamy_Dragon* who volunteered to beta my story. If you saw the original draft, you would be grateful as well.

PROLOGUE

There was great contentment to be found in books. Throughout her life, Hermione Granger had relied upon books to be her steadfast companions – always by her side, providing knowledge, counsel, entertainment, and excitement. Whereas her human friends proved to be unpredictable on occasion, like Harry and Ron, the leather-bound tomes reliably brought the comfort their covers promised.

Hermione's earliest memories were of her sitting upon the divan, resting in the nook of her mum's side. Most of the time the standards of Beatrix Potter were read, but on rainy days, Jean Granger most often chose Dr. Seuss tales; *Are you my Mother?* was Hermione's favorite. To her forming psyche, the story addressed senses of loss, fear, desperation, and a final security upon being saved by an unknown force - it was quite the emotional wallop for a three-year-old girl.

When the time came to go to primary school, she could read, write and wield the vocabulary of a child four years her better. She had a grasp on most basic mathematical concepts and dabbled in science, with a preference towards chemistry. When she was six years of age, Father Christmas brought her a children's lab set - the closest thing she ever considered to be a "toy."

On Hermione's tenth birthday, her first manifestation of magic occurred. Hermione was helping her mum to wash the dishes after dinner. The standing water in the sink had grown tepid. Just as Hermione was about to run the hot tap to reheat the supply, the sink water began "bubbling" and reached a boiling state. No member of the Granger household could figure out what had happened, and the water did not stop boiling until Hermione left the room. No one even picked up on the connection between Hermione and the water.

It came as no surprise that upon the arrival of her Hogwarts letter, the Granger household was curiously puzzled. The notion of witchcraft and wizardry did not fit into their world of facts and theories. The letter informed them to expect the arrival of a liaison from the wizarding world at 2:00 p.m. the next day, someone who could answer any questions the family might have. Like clockwork, a witch named Tilly Taaffe was at their doorstep on Thursday. Even with a visit lasting until well after Hermione's bedtime, so many questions were left unanswered, but Mrs. Taaffe promised she would help the Grangers every step of the way. Shopping for supplies in Diagon Alley, setting up a student account at Gringotts, and the loan of a temporary owl for communication with the wizarding world were arranged and settled by that night. Much to Hermione's delight, Mrs. Taaffe left her with her first welcoming gifts – a non-magical "training" wand (with a workbook for the practice of various "swish and flick" techniques) and a copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

---SSHG---

There was great contentment to be found in books. Throughout his life, Severus Snape had relied upon books to be his steadfast companions – always by his side, providing knowledge, counsel, and on occasion entertainment. For a person who lacked true friends, the leather-bound tomes reliably brought the comfort their covers promised.

Severus' earliest memories were of his father's angry voice and his mother's anguished cries. On rare occasions, Eileen Prince Snape would spend an afternoon reading to Severus, over and over again from the only children's book she had for him, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

Among his few toys, Severus kept a short, smooth stick, a shiny glass agate marble, and a threadbare swaddling cloth. To his forming psyche, the Bard's stories promised potential power, the possibility of love, and a remedy to hide from the ugliness of a dysfunctional life. It was quite the emotional wallop for a three-year-old boy.

Even his father could not restrain Severus' bright mind. At every opportunity, Severus spent time in the library of his primary school. By age seven, he could read, write and wield the vocabulary of a child four years his better. He had a grasp on most basic mathematical concepts and was intrigued by sciences, with a preference towards flora and fauna. When he was six years of age, Father Christmas brought him a stocking with two oranges and a pair of new socks – the first clothes he ever owned which were not obtained from the Spinner's End Charity House.

On Severus' second birthday, his first manifestation of magic occurred. Tobias Snape was exorcizing his demons upon Eileen in his customary way. After beating her into submission, Tobias flung Eileen over the edge of a table, hiked her skirt to her waist and proceeded to take her unwilling and unprepared body. Watching from the kitchen door, Severus was torn by his mother's screams of pain and tearful face. As Severus started to nervously chew on his pacifier, Tobias felt phantom teeth gnawing into his neck. He reached up to stop the pain and brought forth a handful of blood. Making eye contact with his son, Tobias immediately recognized the connection between Severus and the pain. Even though he continued to verbally abuse Eileen whenever it pleased him, Tobias never physically assaulted her again outside the privacy of their bedroom.

Eileen Snape wasn't at all surprised upon the arrival of her son's Hogwarts letter. Tobias Snape was furious, but wary of denying his son an opportunity he had eagerly awaited. Both parents were pleased that for eight months a year, Severus would not be their immediate responsibility. The school's Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, arranged for a scholarship for Severus from the Ministry for Magic, to include purchase of books, supplies, and second-hand robes. Both parents were pleased that for eight months a year that there would be one less mouth to feed and clothe. Severus was thrilled with an opportunity to make friends with other magical children.

Chapter 1 - Awards & Accolades

Chapter 2 of 17

Severus receives the recognition he deserves. Or maybe, he doesn't. Hermione is sure that he should and does something about it.

A/N - Blatantly inspired by the works of J.K. Rowling. I have no ability to make any money through this, nor would I want to. My recompense is the enjoyment of exploring the world of SSHG.

Dreamy_Dragon is my beta. I could never meet the editorial integrity of publication without Dreamy's help. Thank you.

Close to 200 witches and wizards gathered in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic on the evening of Sunday, May 2, 1999. The date marked the one year anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts, and the end of the reign of Tom Riddle.

The atrium had always served as a visual representation of the Ministry's mission and purpose. Gone was the Dark Lord's imposing statue of wizards trampling the backs of Muggles. In its place was a large fountain, a phoenix in its center, emerging from the ashes, its head facing skyward, and water shooting from its mouth in graceful arches. Where once three-floor high banners had hung over the walls displaying the likenesses of Cornelius Fudge, Rufus Scrimgeour and Pius Thickness there now hung the likenesses of Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter and Severus Snape. A large stage was set up with a podium. Tables on either side allowed seating for a few Ministry officials, several ambassadors from other wizarding nations, and three of the evening's honorees – Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger.

A magical back drape hid the Floo System to the rear from view. Displayed upon it were alternating images from the final months of the war between the Light and the Dark. A recreation of Harry and Ron retrieving the Sword of Gryffindor was replaced by a moving visual of Neville Longbottom using the Sword to decapitate Nagini. The next images showed Dumbledore and Snape in conference in the Headmaster's Office, melding into an image of Snape as Headmaster conferring with Dumbledore's portrait in the office. Finally, a panorama of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry under siege melded into a newly rebuilt Hogwarts set against a red autumn sky.

Around the tables, family and friends of the evening's honorees dined and mingled with dignitaries and members of the wizarding press from around the world. The jazz group *The Warlock's Wand* set a pleasant mood as everyone dined and chatted. After everyone finished eating, but before the time started to drag, Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt found his way to the podium.

The Minister addressed the crowd via *Sonorus*, 'Ladies and gentlemen and esteemed guests, on behalf of a thankful Ministry and grateful populace, it is my extreme privilege to welcome you to this venerable event, a celebration of the anniversary of the end of the Second Wizarding War and the bestowment of the Order of Merlin to a number of most worthy recipients.' Many calls of "Hear, hear!" sounded through applause and cheers. As the audience quieted, the Order of Merlin Ceremony began.

The Order of Merlin, Third Class, had the largest number of recipients. Many were members of Dumbledore's Army, but also included was Argus Filch, and memorial awards were bestowed to Colin Creevey and Lavender Brown. The Order of Merlin, Second Class, was awarded to every member of the Order of the Phoenix, including in memoriam Remus and Nymphadora Lupin along with Fred Weasley. When the final two recipients were called to the podium, both Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger received standing ovations.

The evening's culmination finally arrived with the bestowment of the Order of Merlin, First Class. Minerva McGonagall accepted on behalf of Albus Dumbledore, and her

teary-eyed acceptance speech outlined the years Dumbledore spent forced to develop a strategy so interwoven and genial in its concept to ensure the victory of the Light. Finishing, Minerva requested, 'Let us honor not only Albus Dumbledore, but all who lost their lives to the evil of the Dark by witnessing one minute of silent reflection upon their sacrifices which ensured our freedom.'

As the solemn crowd reflected, Shackbolt retook the podium. Claiming the crowd's attention, he began the next introduction. 'We have known our next recipient since infancy, and he unknowingly was fated to be the ultimate catalyst to end this war. His wand was true and his sacrifices great. It is my joyous task to award the Order of Merlin, First Class to a man I am pleased to call my friend, Harry Potter.' The thunderous roar of approval combined with an applause so strong and sustained that after three minutes Kingsley had to call order once again using a *Sonorus* charm.

Harry turned to the crowd with his order in hand. Holding it high, he began his acceptance speech. 'I'm very humbled to be given this award. Often I feel I don't deserve any of this recognition. Our comrades who gave their life are the heroes tonight. I would have never been able to kill Lord Voldemort without their wands. I want to thank the Ministry and everyone here for attending tonight to celebrate our freedom.'

The audience went wild. Cheers and applause threatened to shatter the elf made wine goblets. Two long minutes into the cheering, Shackbolt once again held his wand to his throat. **'PLEASE, QUIET, EVERYONE'**

He continued (grateful for the speech preparation provided by Hermione). 'It is easy to honor the dead and the heroes – and they do deserve our gratitude. Now, I wish to address the true and ultimate champion of our cause. It isn't easy to meet the enemy on the battle field, but it is easy to admire the white knight who charges onto that field. War often isn't won on the battlefield, though. There are always "behind the scenes" machinations taking place. But planning and strategy only go so far. Nothing would be possible to build upon without intelligence: information regarding the enemy that only a spy could provide.

'There is one recipient who should be here tonight and is missing. Consider that we would not be here if it were not for this person's sacrifices to the cause of the Light during the war. Even though he was exonerated for the necessary actions he committed during the war to maintain his cover, this honoree is still vilified and ostracized by our society. Which one of us could have walked into the pit of vipers and stood their ground with Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters? Which one of us could have done things so repulsive in order to ingratiate themselves to curry favor with Tom Riddle? Certainly not me. Ladies and gentlemen, I am grateful for the Order awarded to me tonight. However, that gratitude is eclipsed by the privilege I have in accepting *in absentia*, on behalf of the bravest man I've ever known, this Order of Merlin, First Class, for Severus Snape.'

Pins dropped. The silence was tangible. No smiles broke upon faces. After fifteen seconds of the most uncomfortable silence she had ever experienced, Hermione Granger stood from her seat on the stage, looked at Harry, and began clapping in a strong clipped cadence. Ron, Kingsley, Minerva and the others at the head table glanced at each other before they decided to join Hermione in her applause. Even after a very long thirty seconds, less than one-third of the audience had risen to join the applause, and those who had were receiving glares from their table mates.

Hermione Granger was a woman who grew itchy without a purpose. The past year of peace had been somewhat tedious as she no longer had a cause to champion. Reflecting upon her past at this moment, Hermione realized that S.P.E.W., Buckbeak, and Dumbledore's Army had only been practice. The public perception of Severus Snape was an injustice that made her prior commitments seem like child's play. This was a man still vilified by the very country who should thanking him for their freedom. She had found her new cause.

If you review, you get the satisfaction of knowing I jump up and down and do a happy dance like a fool. Feel free to manipulate me into dancing by leaving your review :)

Chapter 2 - Trial and Tribulation

Chapter 3 of 17

Rita Skeeter does her best to cover Severus Snape's trial for Dumbledore's death in a fair and impartial manner.

Much gratitude to Dreamy_Dragon for her beta help!

~~SSHG~~

Wizards Britain's reaction to the Wizengamot pardoning Snape for his war crimes was *disappointing*. Naturally. Only a handful of witnesses had been made privy to the testimony given to the court by Harry Potter and Dumbledore's portrait. Those few who were also present became subject to the Secretum Charm. Severus Snape's desire had been to wallow away in the pits of Azkaban, but the Wizengamot was determined to project an image of impartiality in this new regime, guilty pleas notwithstanding. Snape only agreed to the trial if testimony was guaranteed to be confidential within the court's walls. If a ticket to Azkaban wasn't written in his tea leaves, then penance could be paid through the court of common opinion. Any facts that would portray him in a positive light would not be made public.

With a lack of evidence to report, the *Daily Prophet* assigned trial coverage to its most imaginative reporter, Rita Skeeter. Since Skeeter was more interested in paper sales figures than fact, she was left to mold a story from the only factual evidence she had – a list of witnesses going into and out of the courtroom each day. On day two of the hearings, Rita had tried to surreptitiously breach the courtroom by assuming her Animagus form of a beetle. She gently settled on the shoulder of a Wizengamot member, but the closer that member approached the chamber, the stronger the zapping feel of the wards echoed on her delicate wings. She was forced to fly away, waiting and watching.

Hermione Granger was summoned on day three to provide testimony in regards to the Patronus that led Harry Potter to the Sword of Gryffindor while in the Forest of Dean. Testimony that day also progressed to a review of the Pensieve memories Snape shared with Harry Potter. As courtroom doors were shut once proceedings began and not reopened until completion, Hermione had been present as the memories were projected for the Wizengamot's benefit. It was not unsurprising that, as she exited the courtroom, her misty eyes and sad expression could be interpreted in a dozen different ways.

The next day's *Prophet* was full of unforgiving scandal fueled by the resentment Skeeter had long held towards Hermione Granger.

THE MURDERER & HIS MISTRESS

Teacher & Student's Forbidden Love Exposed!

Rita Skeeter

It is day three of the trial of Death Eater and murderer Severus Snape. The courtroom continues to bring forth facts that would strike fear into the hearts of the most

hardened witches and wizards. As this reporter stood guard, a stoic Hermione Granger, the Muggle-born witch who climbed to fame on the coattails of our world's savior, Harry Potter, entered the chambers, followed by Aurors toting a heavy Pensieve. Not allowed entrance to the proceedings, this intrepid reporter noted the frequent moments of silence behind closed doors followed by the shallow sobs of a witch not quite eloquent enough to convey the demanded testimony.

The end of the proceedings brought forth a witch who appeared heartbroken and distraught. One can only imagine a lover's pain knowing their beloved will soon be heading to the cold, bleak confinement of Azkaban.

For your benefit, gentle reader, this reporter has amassed a handful of contacts often able to give her the inside scoop on the most discreet of situations. My anonymous contact in the courtroom could not wait to share with me the details of the day. That large Pensieve was used to view the rumored message left for Potter by that diabolical murderer Snape, a message intended to send him straight towards the wand of He-Who-Still-Not-Dare-Be-Named.

It seems the role our scheming Hermione Granger played in this was an added curse to Snape's coffin. When she witnessed the attack upon SS by the Dark Lord's familiar again, she lost her composure and burst into tears.

The reliable owl-in-my-ear source reported that there was much speculation amongst the Wizengamot of Granger's responses during a break in the proceedings. The consensus concluded that, in an attempt to gain access to Potter's plans, notorious spy Severus Snape seduced his own gullible student, the supposedly intelligent Hermione Granger. Is there no ethical boundary this man would not cross in his sycophantic climb to power? It is no wonder that Dumbledore (Merlin rest his wand) had already ordered the Golden Trio on a quest that would take months to complete, effectively removing Granger from contact with her inamorato. The exposé of a teacher and an under-aged pupil would no doubt have brought the strictest of inquiries from Hogwarts Board of Governors. What a shame Miss Granger naively fell in love with a malicious spy.

Dear reader, as this trial continues to unfold its filthy layers, please look forward to my continued in-depth coverage of the proceedings in your source of all news, the DAILY PROPHET.

Two days later, headlines screamed **EVIL EXONERATED! SNAPE SLITHERS TO FREEDOM!** Skeeter's reporting, whether factual or not, reflected in an almost 47 percent increase in subscriptions. The *Prophet* wasn't about to change its ways unless forced to per suit or government restriction. Unfortunately for the paper, the decision had been made, and coverage of the proceedings came to an end. The damage was done, and the court of common opinion was happy to extol its penance upon the should-have-been war hero. Severus Snape quickly became a pariah to wizarding England.

A/N – Yes, I know how to correctly spell Hermione's name. However, I envision Rita Skeeter as being someone so vindictive and petty that if she was forced to give our dear Miss Granger any press at all, she would do so by insult. My beta suggested that the *Prophet* would not want to ruin credibility due to blatant misspellings, and that is a good point. I still think the influence of the increase in sales when her slanderous stories go to print would justify their editor overlooking those errors.

*Secretum – Latin, hidden, secret.

Chapter 3 - Change

Chapter 4 of 17

Hermione and Snape have both been deeply affected by the war. They each reflect upon this in their own ways.

A/N – This chapter will have brief mention of violence and bodily damage, but as acts committed, not in detail. I'm attempting to create a psychological image of our hero and heroine.

Did I mention? Not mine, no money.

Chapter 3 - Change

War is always a catalyst. It is a vehicle of change. Landscapes are laid barren, scorched by the man-made version of a forest fire. Homes and buildings are damaged, sometimes leveled. Political boundaries change, sometimes redefining geographical spaces, sometimes redefining governmental policies. The human component is mostly affected. Families are usually *smaller* due to loss of life. People are usually *smaller* due to loss of innocence.

Fortunately both nature and people are resilient. As the summer following the Battle of Hogwarts progressed, the blackened trees in the Forbidden Forest grew back lush, full, and thick. Repairs to the school structure were coming along at a record pace, thanks to the help of magical engineers from throughout the wizarding world. The Ministry for Magic appropriated emergency funding to Hogsmeade for use in repairs or rebuilding needed for family homes and businesses.

-SSHG-

Knowing someone who has died is a tragedy. Having firsthand experience with impending death is monumental. When Hermione Granger boarded the Hogwarts Express for the first time, she expected to leave several years later with nothing more than a broader knowledge of her world and possibly a decision on her career course. Little did she realize that such goals were frivolous compared to a person's worth.

Hermione stood in front of her mirror, quickly turning when her eyes fell on the scars that marred her body.

Psycho Bellatrix had permanently branded Hermione's arm with her favorite racist epitaph. This scar continued to itch and occasionally sting even over a year after its application. It also dictated Hermione's choice of fashion forevermore. She would always be forced to wear matronly styles that would cover her arms whilst in public. Cute sleeveless tops would expose her scar to unforgiving stares.

Dolohov's curse cut a path from her left shoulder, crossing through her left breast, and then swiping diagonally across her torso ending at her upper right hip. Hermione had come close to bleeding to death in the Department of Mysteries. The patch-up job performed by the emergency mediwitch on the scene had kept her alive, but left her with an uneven, fleshy mark. The tissue was cloudy in places and almost translucent in others. It bisected her left breast, causing two distinct sections which swelled around the curse indentation.

All of her intellectual confidence told her that her physical body was not important; it was the works she would complete that would make her world a better place. All of her feminine confidence told her that hers would be a life of solitude. Her beautiful and youthful body had been sacrificed to the cause of freedom, and her war-scarred body

would never make a potential lover desire her. In the grand scheme of things, Hermione knew she could live a fulfilling life if she continued her mission to make her world a better place.

-SSHG-

Severus Snape knew many people who were dead. Many by his hand and many who suffered greatly before death overcame them.

When he had first entered Hogwarts, he had been excited to leave the hate and anger of Spinner's End behind. His naivete was soon shattered by the bullying of the Marauders. Hogwarts would not be the sanctuary he had dreamed of. Perhaps people from his station of life didn't deserve better.

Trelawney's prophecy was the weapon which Severus could use against his tormentors. Snape thought the prophecy referred to Frank and Alice Longbottom, people he barely knew and had no vested interest in. The prophecy, however, could be the token he needed to gain the Dark Lord's attention and a commission as a Death Eater. Joining those ranks would gain Snape his own group of comrades. He would have protection from Potter & Company and the ability to exact revenge at his leisure.

Voldemort never suspected young Neville Longbottom would one day destroy the last fraction of his soul kept outside of his temporal body. He was determined that Harry Potter was the focus of the prophecy, and he quickly moved to execute the infant. The Dark Lord kept Severus occupied with the brewing of potions while he murdered the only woman his servant had ever loved. Not understanding love, Voldemort viewed Lily Potter as a hindrance to his goal. He had never viewed her as the impetus that would drive his Potions master to seek revenge.

The outcome of the war did not impress Severus. The death of Riddle was what brought him the only satisfaction in his miserable life. A fascist government could have emerged from the ashes and he couldn't have cared. But now that the dust had settled, he realized Riddle's death did not bring him lasting peace.

As Severus dressed in front of his mirror, he focused on his buttons, cuffs, and cravat. He always hated making eye contact with his visage. He didn't want to acknowledge the man staring back at him. Whereas Tom Riddle lacked any empathetic qualities, the brief attention Eileen Snape had given her son had helped him bond with her and imbued him with a sense of how his actions marked others. His actions during both wizarding wars had been a necessary evil to secure his position of spy in Voldemort's inner circle. Now the war was over, Severus felt an overwhelming guilt every day over each heinous act committed at his hand.

All of his efforts had been for naught. Lily Evans still hadn't loved him. All satisfaction from the exacting of his revenge was outweighed by his guilt over ruining others' lives. In essence, he had acted no differently than his dark master. The best thing he could offer this new bright world was the removal of his dark stain from it.

A/N - I've been reading Snamione fanfiction for so long – I am always concerned that I might unconsciously “borrow” from other authors. Plagiarism is NOT my intention. This chapter might echo some ideas I remember from the great epic story *Lay Me Low* by TeddyRadiator. Inspiration from that story may have been noticed in this chapter. If you haven't read it, chapters 14 - 16 of *Lay Me Low* may be the sexiest thing I've ever read. My dear beta, Dreamy_Dragon, pointed out the description also resembles Hermione's appearance in Bambu's *Guard... Check... Mate* which I haven't read yet, but she claims it to be one of her favourite pre-DH stories. Time for me to start reading a new story! Thank you, Dreamy_Dragon, for your beta and Brit-picking. You're the best.

Chapter 4 - Visitors

Chapter 5 of 17

Snape deals with a knock at the door. Hermione comes up with another brilliant idea.

A/N – I am making no profit by the publication of this story, with the exception of profiting from the experience.

~~SSHG~~

Severus Snape led a solitary life in Spinner's End. This was not the type of place frequented by magical folk, and even Muggles avoided its bleak poverty if possible. Therefore, when his wards alerted him of visitors approaching his door, he was wary.

“Mister Potter, Minister, to what do I owe the *pleasure* of your visit?” Snape's cold welcome hung in the air.

Kingsley answered, “Severus, we've come to make a delivery. May we enter?”

Snape debated the irony of having Harry Potter enter his home and decided this was another piece of the purgatory pie he should suffer in grace. He stepped aside and motioned for the two men to come through his door.

Escorting them into his sitting room, he gestured for them to sit on the threadbare sofa, then followed suit and sat across from them in his reading chair. “So, Minister, what is of such importance that would necessitate your personal delivery to my home?”

“Severus, we missed your presence last week at the Order of Merlin ceremony. We've come to deliver your Order.” Kingsley wasn't certain how he would convince Snape to accept the Order, seeing that Snape had replied to the event's invitation with a curt NO.

“Your visit is unnecessary, Minister. I do not deserve this award; hence, I shall not accept it.”

“Sir,” Harry interjected, “if I may, you do deserve it, more so than any other recipient last week. None of us would be here today if it had not been for your sacrifices.”

Aggravated with his comment, Severus snapped at Harry. “Mister Potter, the Order of Merlin should be awarded to one who benefited our society in great ways. I did not do that. You did. My actions were criminal at least and morally repugnant at best. My intentions were never to help free society from Voldemort's clutches. My motives were personal. I do not deserve the honor. Since I didn't die from Nagini's attack, I am happy to live my life paying for my crimes. The Wizengamot does not see fit to incarcerate me in Azkaban. Let me suffer in the best way I see fit.”

Kingsley then attempted a mercenary approach. “Severus, you do realize that your Order of Merlin, First Class, is accompanied by an initial stipend of 8,000 Galleons, with a 900 Galleon annuity until death?”

“Minister, you come to my home uninvited. Adding insult to injury, you bring Potter along. You attempt to convince me to accept an honor I don't want. And when I do not accept it, you try to bribe me.” Snape started to rise, expecting his words and actions would incline both of his guests to leave.

“Snape, we didn't come here to insult you or to disturb your peace. I'm sorry we've done so. Please understand that whatever your motives were, they resulted in the

betterment of our society, and for that we are all extremely grateful.”

“You should choose your words more carefully, Minister. Now you’ve added prevarication to your transgressions. ‘We’ are not all extremely grateful — in fact, most of them shun and despise me. I’ve even lost my key apothecary supply contracts to French potioners for fear I would poison my inventory. If I would kill Dumbledore, why wouldn’t I kill strangers? As far as ‘we’ are concerned, I’m still the rogue Death Eater.”

“Professor, I understand your need for privacy. But please, let me share your motives. Let me be interviewed by *The Quibbler* and explain your role. I don’t have to tell the entire story; I could leave my mum out altogether. But let me explain. Once people know…”

“No. I refuse to have my motives shared. Now please, I have things to attend to…”

“Mr. Snape, I need to let you know that even if you don’t accept this medal, the monetary stipend is automatically transferred to your Gringotts account. It is there, whether you spend it or not. We’ll see ourselves out. Thank you for allowing us this visit.”

“Yes, sir, thank you. I am glad I got to see you again.”

Harrumph. As Shacklebolt and Potter walked around the corner to discreetly Apparate, Severus reflected on the visit. He had expected a personal visit from someone. It had been one week since the Order of Merlin Ceremony, and he refused the daily owls that had arrived since. And blast those bloody goblins. Of course they would be indifferent if Galleons were involved. Transfers of funds generated fees and reinvested fees generated interest. It seemed in this new order he still could not atone for his sins. Whenever he attempted self-flagellation with a leather strap, fate transfigured the strap to silk.

~~SSHG~~

The next day found Harry and Hermione catching up over pints at the Leaky Cauldron.

“So that was it, Harry? Kingsley still has the medal? I can’t imagine what he means by ‘suffer.’” Hermione did not want to believe his account of the visit with Snape.

Harry responded, “He never said it outright, but he acted as if he still wanted to be punished for being a Death Eater. It’s almost like the worse society treats him, the more satisfied he is.”

“Yes, but, Harry, does he just plan to remove himself from society forever? The man can’t be forty years old yet. He’s not even middle aged. How will he make do?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that myself. I don’t think he has a great need for the Galleons. His home is in a run-down area, and I bet he lives a meager lifestyle. But even considering that, he has to buy food and necessities eventually. Money will become an issue for him at some point.”

“But he can always produce potions. There’s always a need and demand for that.”

Harry sighed. “Already tried and failed. He claims nobody will order from him. He also said that some French potioners have taken over his market.”

“That’s it, Harry!” Hermione smiled ecstatically. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re brilliant!”

“Of course I am. It sure would be nice, though, to know what I’m so brilliant at.”

“Marketing, Harry! Marketing! That’s all Professor Snape needs, some positive marketing!”

“I’m lost, Hermione. You mean a decent trip to the grocer will fix his problems?”

“No, silly. Don’t you remember? It’s a Muggle concept. Not marketing for food, marketing for publicity. Muggles do this all the time to promote people, businesses, anything! Severus Snape needs to have a positive public relations campaign, and that will set things straight. We can do this; it will be our way of ‘paying back’ Snape for all he sacrificed.”

“Good luck with that, Hermione. If I can help, I will. I think your biggest hurdle won’t be changing the way people feel about him, but it will be convincing him to let you do that.”

Chapter 5 - Insight and Introspection

Chapter 6 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

A/N – I am thrilled that you are reading this story, and many are following along waiting for the next chapters. Your reviews are food for my muse, and my beta, Dreamy_Dragon, is the reason for your kind words. Thank you, Dreamy! BTW, this is the last chapter reflecting introspective views prior to our OTP meeting in the flesh.

Since the war had ended, Hermione Granger had a good bit of time on her hands. She attended Snape’s trial in July and had been able to sit her N.E.W.T.s in September. She debated whether or not to attend a Muggle university but wanted also to *relax* after the stress of the war and its aftermath. Her gap year would be spent traveling Asia, the Mediterranean, Canada, or wherever her whims decided.

Hermione returned home after spending her winter in Greece and Egypt. She next decided her time would be best spent exploring the hidden streets of London and finding quiet places to read neglected books. Each time she considered the importance of continuing her education, she took a deep breath and decided life was too short. Knowledge may have been a great help in defeating Voldemort, but it was the combination of human character strengths that were his downfall. There was always the possibility that other opportunities would present themselves, and university could wait another year.

Hermione’s excitement grew when she received her engraved invitation to the Ministry of Magic’s Order of Merlin ceremony. A missive enclosed with the invitation listed the names of all of the Order recipients. Even though she was honored to be named an Order recipient, she was pleasantly surprised to see her former professor’s name listed as well—and he would receive the highest award bestowed.

Hermione had always admired Snape, and even though he was a right git to her and her friends, by her sixth year she had begun to suspect his behavior was a ruse for his role in espionage. Knowing he was a member of the Order of the Phoenix was testament to his motives. Even though the night with Dumbledore on the Astronomy

Tower had challenged her faith in him, her logical thoughts began to suggest that Dumbledore's plea could be interpreted more than one way while she, Ron and Harry were on the hunt.

In the days following the war's end, Harry refused to share the message he received from Snape with Hermione and Ron. His attitude changed radically, and whenever Ron would utter a disparaging remark about the former Headmaster, Harry would often jump to Snape's defense quicker than Hermione. Harry's new outlook was the confirmation that Snape had remained loyal to the Light until his supposed death.

Four days after the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry brought his friends the unbelievable news of Snape's survival. It seemed the Hogwarts house-elves instinctively recognized the peril of their Headmaster and were able to Apparate his unconscious body to St. Mungo's. Aurors at the scene demanded the mediwitches triage Snape first and guarantee his survival. Only two other Death Eaters walked away alive from the final battle (Lucius and Draco Malfoy, who fled to France) and justice demanded someone be brought to trial for the horrors of Voldemort's reign.

That night, Harry and Hermione got pissed celebrating the news. Ron still couldn't come to terms with their acceptance of the "bat of the dungeons," so he agreed to Side-Along Apparate them home once the Firewhisky stopped flowing. But between the three of them, majority ruled and consensus decided the man needed a fair start at a new life.

It irked Hermione when Snape's fair start at that new life didn't seem to materialize. The *Daily Prophet* easily infiltrated his guarded, private room at St. Mungo's, and two days following his admittance to the hospital, his picture was plastered on the rag's front page. The wizarding photograph displayed him in his worst convalescent glory—lying across a hospital cot in a stark room, possibly naked with only a sheet to cover him, upper chest and shoulders exposed with bloody bandages surrounding his neck. When his image shook with a sharp *gag*, the sheets slipped slightly down his torso to expose his nipples, and his lank, greasy hair fell over his face. For such a guarded and private person, this was a photograph designed to humiliate. The picture had brought satisfaction to a judgmental public and a migraine to Hermione.

~~SSHG~~

Severus Snape begrudgingly tolerated all the bad press he received from the *Daily Prophet* and the resulting treatment from his fellow citizens. He had plenty of practice throughout his life with humiliation, and he would bear this burden as well. Even though he had entered the Shrieking Shack prepared to die, he admitted to himself it felt good to draw breath today. At least while recuperating, the Healers at St. Mungo's treated him with a modicum of dignity, even if the Aurors posted outside his door didn't.

Because of the shadow of guilt he carried, he was not annoyed by bad press focused towards him. The only erroneous reports Severus didn't like were those during his trial, regarding his former student Hermione Granger. While he had been her teacher, he couldn't risk exposure by treating her with anything but contempt. His hateful exterior did hide the fact that he grew to respect the girl. She was intelligent, resourceful, brave, and—most importantly—fiercely loyal to her friends. While the Golden Trio was hunting Horcruxes, Snape felt confident that it would be Hermione who kept the boys one step ahead of the Snatchers and that she would solve the riddle regarding the Sword of Gryffindor's role.

Snape had spent no time dwelling on his former student until his trial. When Miss Granger entered the courtroom, Severus was mildly surprised by her change in demeanor. Gone was the insecure young Muggle-born who virtually demanded acceptance as an equal from her pure-blood contemporaries. Replacing her was a confident young woman who could not be intimidated by the Wizengamot. Severus indulged in a slight sense of pride when he thought that his demanding nature as her teacher may have slightly molded her into the young woman she was now.

Chapter 6 - Tea

Chapter 7 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

A/N - Our ship is finally setting sail and Hermione and Severus meet! Thank you to my beta, Dreamy_Dragon, who has been so very busy but still finding time to be my mentor in all things grammatical. Not mine, no money, otherwise, I wouldn't hold down two jobs. Please review!

Chapter 6 Tea

3 July

Mr. Snape,

I write to you with no expectations of acknowledgment of this missive.

However, if you are so inclined, I'd request the honor of an interview.

It is time I made use of myself, and my thoughts lead to starting a business. Your opinions were valued during my formative years. I expect they are still of great worth.

If you are amenable to meeting me, please owl back with a date, place and time of your convenience.

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

Severus looked over the note several times wondering what Miss Granger was about. Why she would seek his counsel was puzzling. Certainly McGonagall was a more effective mentor.

Snape placed the post on his mantelpiece. The fact that he had not immediately Incendioed it was surprising enough, but since many people did not voluntarily reach out to him these days, his curiosity was piqued.

Three days had passed before Severus decided that a reply was a necessary courtesy that couldn't wait any longer. Sitting with his quill in hand, he pondered in how many ways he could reply in the negative. 'NO' had always worked well in the past, but wasn't the past what he regretted? With every intention of denying her request, he began to write.

Miss Granger

The Tea Room. Harrods. Tuesday next. Half Three.

SS

~~SSHG~~

Hermione stared at the note in her hand. It had been over two and a half years since she had seen the scrawled penmanship, and she had never expected to see it again, especially as a concession to one of her requests. She already had an idea of how to present her intentions to Snape, but she was concerned she would never be able to convince him to agree to go along with those intentions. An afternoon was spent fretting and planning how to manipulate Snape into becoming her first public relations project. She would have to channel whatever Slytherin qualities she might possess to achieve her goal.

~~SSHG~~

The week went quickly. Hermione arrived early and stationed herself in Harrods bookshop, hoping to catch a glimpse of Snape when he entered The Tea Room across the way. Distractions surrounded her on all sides. After an hour of browsing Muggle books on business administration, she decided to make her way to her planned meeting without a glimpse of the man. Passing through the travel goods section to reach her destination, Hermione caught a deep breath of the designer leather luggage and satchels that far exceeded her discretionary income.

Hermione stated to The Tea Room's host, "You should have a table for two set aside Granger."

"Yes, Miss, your other party has already arrived. Follow me, please."

~~SSHG~~

Severus sat at a table in a quiet corner of the room, surreptitiously glancing from behind his menu. He watched the host approach but could not quite see the person behind him. Before he had chance to prepare himself, the host stepped aside to pull out the seat for Miss Granger.

Severus almost did a double-take, nearly losing his composure, but at the last second, he politely stood as Hermione was seated. Was this the same swotty chit who had left Hogwarts at the end of her sixth year? This *woman* looked familiar, but so very changed. Instead of her school robes, this person wore a tailored navy suit with a white-collared blouse and brown leather laced oxfords with a one inch heel. Though her dress was conservative, her style and carriage conveyed a confidence which overshadowed any matronly characteristics. He was studying her face when she presented her hand in greeting. Caught off guard, he uncharacteristically shook it, setting her at ease.

This won't go well. Severus thought. *Barely a year from battle, and I've dropped my guard. You're getting rusty, old man. Time to take control.* Composing himself, Severus proceeded, "A pleasure, Miss Granger. You appear well."

~~SSHG~~

Grateful that he offered a painless ice-breaker, Hermione replied, "Thank you, Mr. Snape. I am very pleased you agreed to meet me. You also appear well." *Does he ever.* Hermione thought. She had never seen him away from Hogwarts. His Muggle clothing suited him well. Wearing cotton chino slacks pressed with a crease along with a crisp cotton button-down complemented with a loosely wrapped grey summer scarf, his pastel palette was the antithesis of the persona she knew. *Wow. That's some reincarnation,* she couldn't help but think.

After ordering tea service for the table, Hermione decided to make her proposal. At the last moment all of her prior planning was thrown aside. This man did not deserve manipulation. The truth would be her course of action. "Mr. Snape, I am certain you must be curious about my request to meet. I'm surprised you actually met me, and I'm very happy you did. I do value your opinion and hope that it will help me."

"Miss Granger, your request was unexpected. I'll admit, I have plenty of unused time these days and decided what better way to amuse myself than to see what's become of a former student's life."

"Well, Mr. Snape, I hope that I'm not here to be a subject of amusement. My goals are somewhat more sensible."

~~SSHG~~

Sensible, indeed. Severus mused. As he waited for her to continue, he noticed so many more changes. Miss Granger's adolescent features were a thing of the past. Her smug grin was replaced with a serious countenance. Her face displayed the resonance of past struggles and bitter acceptance. The wild, bushy mane was tamed to a wavy coiffure, pulled neatly back and secured with a pearled barrette. The brown eyes that had often directed a fiery glare towards him or his godson now projected a sad and resigned loss.

"Miss Granger, if we are to review those goals, let's put niceties aside. I've not traveled all the way here from Manchester for tea and biscuits. Proceed."

~~SSHG~~

Hermione cast a silent Muffliato before she began.

"Mr. Snape, I confess that as I was planning how to make my proposal, I originally wanted to find a way of convincing you to accept it. However, I admit those plans were not fair to you. I know that you have spent most of your life being manipulated and conscripted to fulfill someone else's agenda." Hermione paused to rub her left wrist. "I cannot in good conscience try to sway you to accept my proposal by using underhanded tactics. I'm going to take the direct approach and wait for your decision."

Gryffindors. Using too much breath to spit out the truth. She's smart enough anyway to realize no ruse of hers could fool me. Severus leaned back in his chair, crossed one leg over another, and folded his arms in front of him. *She can keep talking and dig her own grave. This might be an entertaining excursion after all.*

"Mr. Snape, I plan to begin a business venture. I have spent many months considering my future options, and reflecting upon my past passions, I've decided to open a public relations agency."

Severus was confused and not willing to admit he was unsure of what she meant by 'public relations.' *Is she trying to facilitate illicit activities in public?* Explain."

Hermione began. "I am not certain, Mr. Snape, if you were aware of my extracurricular activities at school. I was always trying to promote a cause, beginning in my third year with the establishment of the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare through my sixth year organizing and helping develop Dumbledore's Army. I cannot imagine living outside of the wizarding world, but I have decided I'll bring to it a Muggle vocation. Public relations, promoting products, people, even organizations, seems to be my forte. I plan to open the first public relations agency in a magical culture."

Severus recollected seeing a strange S.P.E.W. lapel button years ago and dismissing it as rubbish. He knew also that Miss Granger would have played a strong role in the DA and realized he should have known that Potter and Weasley didn't have the skills to organize and recruit so many members on their own. "Well, Miss Granger, you've already had success with promotion on an amateur level. You should certainly have at least a limited success with your skills, especially since you will have no competition."

At that moment, their busser brought a tea kettle to their table and began pouring the steaming Earl Grey. As he stepped away, their waiter delivered the tiered tea service, abundant with sandwiches, miniature quiches, scones, clotted cream, curd, and jellied biscuits.

Hermione waited for her guest to take a sip and put a quiche on his plate before she continued, "Yes, that was what I was hoping. It could be a revolutionary business. I'm not certain yet how marketing would influence the wizarding population. There is no established past performance to measure."

If this woman thinks she will change our attitudes towards house-elves, she is delusional!"Miss Granger, the best opinion I can offer you is don't. You will never change our culture's attitude towards house-elves, no matter how *noble* you consider your cause. I suggest you stay with an accepted vocation suited to your abilities, say in Transfiguration or Arithmancy? Certainly you haven't lost much time by pursuing a mastery in either of these fields."

"I am not expressing myself well, Mr. Snape. Long ago I accepted that my Muggle ideals did not transfer to wizarding culture, and it was unjust of me to expect our world to adapt to my feelings regarding house-elves." Hermione paused to sip her tea and compose her thoughts before she continued. "I suppose I brought up that aspect so you would know that I have firsthand experience with what works and doesn't work in the public relations field. My intention is to start this business and work on the marketing of other things: businesses, institutions, geographic locations, people, and so on. That is why I am looking for your acceptance of my proposal."

Severus was growing frustrated. "But why do you feel it necessary to convince me you need my acceptance of your choice in this endeavor? You've made no proposal."

Hermione took a deep breath, squeezed her left wrist and took a leap of faith. "Mr. Snape, I need your approval because I want to make you my first project. I want to change the public's perception of you."

Chapter 7 - Agreement

Chapter 8 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

A/N - OK, gentle reader, the time has arrived. In my prologue I mentioned there may be some hot-dirty-monkey-sex. This chapter isn't quite it, but consider it a preview of things to come. I'm sure the moderators will agree it earns at least a T (PG-13), possibly an M (R), if not an MA (NC-17). Enjoy. My deep gratitude to Dreamy_Dragon for continuing to beta my work. It's a mess until Dreamy does the stuff.

Please don't sue me, JKR! I'm not making any income from this. But thank you for the original ideas.

Hermione took a deep breath, squeezed her left wrist and took a leap of faith. "Mr. Snape, I need your approval because I want to make you my first project. I want to change the public's perception of you."

It was a good thing Severus had already swallowed his bite of quiche. When Hermione had finally made her proposal, he had to call upon his latent self-control to prevent snorting. "Miss Granger, why would you ever want to do that?" Severus asked sharply.

"Mr. Snape, I know that you are a private person. You may resent the fact that after Harry visited you with Minister Shacklebolt; he related your current circumstances to me. I also know that the public has never forgiven you for being a Death Eater. Besides Horace Slughorn, you are the only other Potions master in all of Britain. There should be no reason you cannot regain your potions supply customers without jeopardizing your private life. The skills you have to offer are wasted. Everyone would benefit, including you." Hermione stopped to breathe. She knew she would have to defend her proposal. Her nerves were on edge, waiting for his counter-challenge.

Severus regarded Hermione a moment. Her breath rate had escalated, her speech sounded prepared and rehearsed, yet she had still delivered it at a rapid rate. He noticed again how she stroked her left wrist with her right hand. Funny, he had never noticed any nervous tics when she was a student. Miss Granger seemed unable to keep a "poker face" as an adult.

"You do realize," Severus began calmly, "that what you propose is parallel to my entire existence from when I chose to take the Mark until the time the Boy Wonder defeated Tom Riddle. You want to step up to the spots vacated by Voldemort and Dumbledore, controlling my life and determining my destiny. You can certainly understand why I will decline your most *generous offer*."

Hermione had prepared herself for this line of reasoning. "Mr. Snape, I am not manipulating or oversteering. I promise you that I have no designs on controlling you in any way. All I ask is that you allow me to formulate a model of action and review it with you. You would have total right of sanction on how we proceed. It's possible that my plan won't change anyone's attitude towards you. It could be a failure. But, Mr. Snape, I strongly feel that I must try."

"If attitudes remain constant, my situation stays as it is. I'm satisfied with that. I do not seek public recognition, Miss Granger. Nor do I wish for it. And I certainly have no obligation to you to help fulfill your need to try."

"Mr. Snape, you certainly recall that I was privy to your trial testimony. I know that you pleaded guilty and had no desire to be exonerated. I can speculate on why you wish to be loathed and despised, but your reasoning is none of my business, nor is it anyone else's. My goal is three-fold: gain experience in wizarding public relations, benefit the public by providing access to your potions, and give you a purpose again."

Snape pondered that Miss Granger might be the first person to ever attempt to enter his life and respect his personal boundaries at the same time. He was beginning to truly wonder if her intentions were as altruistic as she declared. Before he could decide, their waiter approached the table.

Both tablemates were glad when the waiter chose that moment to deliver the cheque. Though Severus reached for it, Hermione quickly gestured that she was responsible for today.

"Mr. Snape, you are here at my invitation. This is a business meeting. Please, let me take care of our tea." He allowed her the concession as she had given him a respectful reason for him not to take the gentleman's role.

Once she had settled the bill, Severus rose and proceeded to pull her chair out for her to rise. Hermione looked over her shoulder, whispering a demure, "Thank you," and then rose fully to extend her hand to him.

"Mr. Snape, I am very grateful you agreed to meet with me and discuss my project. I have to admit, it has been a pleasure speaking to you without fear of losing house points. I am sorry that my proposal doesn't interest you, but I've enjoyed this bit of time we have shared. Thank you for that."

"You are welcome. May I escort you to the Floo or Apparition Point?"

~~SSHG~~

Well slap me silly and call me Sally, Hermione thought. "Please, Mr. Snape," she choked, "I would appreciate that."

"Après-vous, Mademoiselle." Severus gestured towards the door with his left hand and fell into step behind Hermione as she crossed the room to its exit.

Both stepped from the aroma of butter and tea leaves into an area infused with the signature of warm, tanned hide. As they walked past luggage covered with creamy blonde leather, Hermione reached out to brush the tips of her fingers over its smooth surface.

Severus could not help but notice her small indulgence.

Hermione did not notice the twitch in his left eyelid, his uncontrolled response to her small sample of public sensuality.

~~SSHG~~

As they reached the Apparition point, Hermione once again turned to Severus. "Mr. Snape, I do hope that you will change your mind about my proposal. Regardless, it was a great pleasure spending this time with you."

Severus took Hermione by surprise. "Change my mind? If haven't decided anything yet."

"I don't understand. It was fairly obvious you were not interested in this venture."

"Miss Granger, you would have made a terrible spy. You were the one who stated I wasn't interested. I never said that. However, I haven't made a decision."

Hermione's heart started to race. *I can't believe he may go through with this!* "I am glad to hear that." For all of her internal jitters, Hermione calmly continued, "Please take your time considering what I have said. When you are ready, please owl me again. If you agree, I would like to present a tentative plan at our next meeting. If you don't agree, I would be happy to meet you for your dismissal. It would be good to see you again."

~~SSHG~~

As Hermione Apparated away from the space, Severus couldn't help but consider what had happened in the space of two hours. *I met with Miss Granger. I had tea with Miss Granger. I enjoyed Miss Granger's company. She stated she enjoyed my company. Hell must have frozen over.* Even though he knew he shouldn't, Severus Snape, Masochist Extraordinaire, didn't stop his muscles as the left corner of his mouth curled up into a grin.

~~SSHG~~

The smell of cake and black tea filled his senses. A hint of vanilla accented the aroma, and Hermione Granger walked past him, leaving in her wake the scent of leather and musk. As she passed, she looked demurely over her shoulder.

"Thank you," she whispered so breathlessly he almost had not heard her. She was elegant yet outdated, severe but touchable in her high-necked blazer, A-line skirt, and kid-leather, knee-high black boots. The tight cut of the clothing offered no motion as she continued forward, and he found himself missing the gentle dance that a witch's robes would have offered. She turned stiffly to face him. "Severus, come to the table. I have a proposal to make."

Severus found his feet obeying her voice. For some reason sharing her company was pleasurable. He reached her side, but had no compunction to do anything without following her suggestion first.

"Sit, Severus. No, not there. At my feet."

His body complacently agreed, and before he knew it, her leather-covered ankles and calves were at the level of his nose.

"I am going to change you," she purred.

Severus felt strangely uncomfortable meeting her gaze. He kept his eyes focused on the leather-bound legs close enough to lick.

Hermione reached down and stroked his head, running her nails lightly across his scalp. "If you agree, Severus, I promise everything will be so much better. Everyone will appreciate you as I do. All you have to do is give me total control over every facet of your life."

She spoke so sweetly, but he sensed an undercurrent of danger. He also sensed a tingling sensation in his groin as his cock began to swell.

Snape couldn't help but think of how much of a struggle this past year had been. He was virtually a hermit at Spinner's End. Any small quotient of respect he had once held as a Hogwarts teacher was well in the past. He tried so hard to punish himself since no one else would, but truth be told, self-imposed loneliness might be worse than a cell in Azkaban. He missed the company of others, but he knew he was too stubborn to change his ways.

"Are you tired of punishing yourself, Severus? Say the word. Let Miss Granger take over."

"Yes! Please! Thank you!" The words escaped Severus in a quick gasp. He was so very tired of having to control his own destiny. If she would only stay and tell him what he should do.

Hermione placed the sole of her right boot on his left shoulder. She pressed down just enough to where the heel would leave a pink mark on his chest and gave a gentle push. "Turn around. On your hands and knees. Assume your position in my presence."

By allowing his mind to go blank and obediently following her instruction, Severus sighed as the weight of responsibility lifted from his soul. "Do you want to be punished, Severus?" Hermione demanded.

"Yes," he replied. Severus felt the brief sting of a mild hex strike his balls.

"When you address me, you shall always call me Mistress. Should I allow you the opportunity to continue? Tell me, Severus, do you want to be punished?"

"Please, Mistress, punish me. I deserve it."

Hermione slowly circled his submissive body. With a wave of her wand, his wool trousers and underwear pooled on the ground around his knees. He barely had time to register the distinct whoosh of the crop slice through the air before he heard its crack across his right buttock and felt the sting on his flesh. Hermione administered two more strikes, then ever so slowly and lightly dragged the leather flays of the crop through his legs and brushed his testicles.

Severus had been fully erect the moment his knees had hit the floor and his eyes had met her boots. The sensation of the leather flays brought a drop of pre-cum to his

glans and a pulse through the veins of his shaft.

"Thank you, Mistress," he panted.

Her reply was only to land three more blows to his reddening behind, followed again by the caress of the crop on his heated sac.

Hermione walked in front of Severus. She took the crop and brought its leather ends to his upper lip. "You may kiss your crop, Severus."

He reverently placed his lips on the implement, inhaling deeply its tanned essence mixed with his own heady pheromones.

"Stand and follow me, Severus." Hermione crossed the space to the large bed, which filled an empty, dim space. She crawled across the bed and gestured for him to lie across the middle, face down. Coated fingers gently stroked the welts she had left, and the cool fragrance of eucalyptus displaced the vanilla, leather, cake and tea. He found he missed the other smells, but her ministrations brought him great comfort.

Before Severus could register what was happening, his mistress moved to the head of the bed. "Come to me, Severus, let me hold you." Severus crawled to her side and, following her lead, laid his taller body in her arms as best he could. "You have taken your punishment well, Severus. You have earned a reward." With that promise, Hermione brought her delicate arm, sheathed to the wrist in navy silk, across his torso and reached for his erection. Taken firmly in her hand, before she could apply the first stroke, Severus spurted his come like a third-year Hufflepuff.

~~SSHG~~

A quick gasp for air, and Severus bolted up straight in his bed.

A quick Tempus showed it was 3:15 a.m. A cooling, sticky glob coating his fingers showed the evidence of a wet dream.

Chapter 8 - Dreams

Chapter 9 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

A/N – Thank you for all of your reviews! I am happy you are enjoying this story. Don't forget my beta, Dreamy_dragon, who is my hero.

She had been tense with anticipation while she waited for her meeting with Severus Snape that afternoon. The entire scenario had played out so differently from what she had expected. Gone was the saturnine man who avoided personal conversation. She had been prepared for that. Instead she had been greeted by a courteous gentleman who had listened to her case and added in his two Knut's worth. Gone was the dark and stern wizard. Instead there was a wizard who – whilst not lighthearted – was much more subtle in his dress and demeanor. Gone was the professor whose words were insulting and demeaning. Instead there was a man who displayed a chivalrous behavior that showed respect towards her person. Everything about the Severus Snape she had met yesterday had caught her off guard.

Probably the most surprising thing was her reaction to him. Her heart had already been racing with dread anticipation when she had entered the tea room. Its pace hadn't slowed down when she saw him. The adrenaline flowing through her at the time had changed its reason without her awareness; instead of self-preservation the chemical had tricked her subconscious into attraction. Upon reflection Hermione admitted that the sight of Severus Snape in casual clothing was a handsome sight indeed. His courteous escort to the Apparition point had reinforced her justification for this attraction.

Hermione made certain to take notes on the pertinent points of their discussion with plans to formulate a more specific strategy the next day. After feeding Crookshanks and inspecting her tidy flat for any hidden housekeeping duties, she sat on her sofa and picked up a worn book. As familiar words soothed her, Hermione started to relax. She scratched behind her Kneazle's ear while enjoying the vibration of his purr against her thigh. A belly full of scones, quiches and warm tea provided the catalyst that caused her eyes to close for a brief nap.

Hermione glided into an empty space filled with the rich scents of leather, warm cake, vanilla, tea and cream. Across the space a familiar visage slowly materialized. This person frightened her, but only slightly. She gasped when she recognized her former teacher.

"A pleasure, Miss Granger. You appear well." The words drifted from his lips, and his voice dragged through the word "pleasure," causing Hermione's skin to prickle.

Hermione gravitated towards him and reached to shake his hand. Snape took her hand and brought it slowly to his lips, kissing her knuckles whilst his eyes remained fixed upon hers. Caught in his gaze, she registered his turn of her wrist and his lips brush over her pulse point.

She was unsure of their purpose, so Hermione began to tell Snape of her project. He interrupted her, stating, "Miss Granger, if we are to review those goals, let's put niceties aside. I've not travelled all the way here from Manchester for tea and biscuits. Proceed."

Somehow Hermione knew exactly how to proceed. She smiled demurely and slowly dropped to her knees, her hands lazily gliding down his legs, the feel of thick chino cotton leaving a tingling wake on her fingertips. She rested her head against his upper thigh, pressing her nose to his groin and deeply inhaling the scent of his manhood. With no explanation or sound, his clothing was gone, and the wiry hair on his legs pleasantly scratched her cheek. Before her was an erect male penis, thick and strong. Curious, she reached up to touch its velvety smoothness and dragged her tongue up the length of its engorged stiffness. He tasted of tan and Oolong. His scent shot straight to her brain.

~~SSHG~~

His hand threaded through her loosened curls, and he stroked her crown as Victor once had. Her heart raced as he responded to her kisses and suckles and a deep moan rose from his chest. He widened his stance and took her face in both hands, slowly pressing his cock into her mouth, applying one, two, three languid strokes. His dark stare let her know she was desired. He took her hands, helped her to her feet, and looked towards the bed that stood in the empty space.

"Après-vous, Mademoiselle." Severus gestured towards the bed with his left hand and fell into step behind Hermione as she crossed the space towards it. She realized now

she was nude, and her sudden panic over her ugly and scarred body was replaced with a sensation of anticipation as he came from behind, reached around her body and allowed his hands to ghost over her now apparently unscarred torso. She reveled in the electric trail left by his touch. He turned her slowly and pressured her to lie down. Hermione's breath quickened in time with the warm awakening of her womanhood as he lathed her nipple.

He crawled across her body as if stalking his prey. She groaned in response as he wrapped his arms under her shoulders, crushing her torso to his before nestling into the crux of her thighs. She was intoxicated by his cool breath as his lips parted hers and his tongue slid into her mouth. She felt his penis moving as if on its own accord. He pressed himself against her mons, then moved to allow his cock to part her other lips.

She felt the sudden need to protest, but her hands and ankles were bound in place by leather straps, forcing her to instead accept the pleasure being drawn from her. She felt him press into her body and her mind was overwhelmed with the feel of intensity building within her clitoris. She knew she shouldn't like this. He was her client and he had been her teacher. Nothing, though, could stop the spring was building in her womb. Severus labored above her, keeping her eyes within his acquisitive gaze. Without warning he emitted a hiss, leaned to her left wrist, and dragged his tongue over it. His touch stung her scar, and the pain was displaced with the eruption of her orgasm.

~~SSHG~~

She startled herself awake around 3:15am, gasping at her orgasmic dream. A swiftly beating heart would not allow her to settle back to sleep. She retreated to her bedroom, not surprised that Crookshanks had left her hours earlier and was sleeping soundly at his corner of their den.

Once comfortable beneath her covers, she brought her fingers to her clitoris, slowly stroking, then quickly flicking as she tried to find relief from the disturbing dream. Unable to bring herself to satisfaction, she finally relented to the call of sleep two hours later.

Wednesday morning brought with it a tired and frustrated Hermione Granger. She sat at her table, nursing black coffee and desperately writing notes. She could not allow herself to become romantically attracted to a potential client, possibly sabotaging her business before it began. She could not allow herself to become romantically attracted to any man. Her scarred and ugly body would only bring the humiliation and torment of rejection if any affections were returned.

Chapter 9 - The Library

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione likes to ogle books. Severus likes to ogle Hermione.

A/N - All hail J. K. Rowling, who owns the rights to any and everything Harry Potter (that Warner Bros. and other subsidiaries don't own). I'm doing this for fun, not profit. Thanks again to my marvelous beta, Dreamy_Dragon.

The Monday of the following week found Crookshanks sitting at the closed kitchen window, his eyes carefully watching for any opportunity to pounce upon the brown owl perched on the outside ledge.

"Down you go, Mister," Hermione admonished as she picked up her familiar and moved him to the floor. Opening the pane to allow the owl entry, she looked at the parchment tied to his leg. "Now let's see what you have in exchange for this treat."

It had been almost a week since their meeting at Harrods, and Hermione had anxiously awaited Mr. Snape's decision. She was slightly disappointed when she unfurled the scroll, and instead of seeing the scrawl of his quill, she recognized the fluid penmanship of Mrs. Ginevra Potter.

TO: Miss Hermione Granger & Guest

You are invited to join us as we celebrate Harry's Birthday.

Place: 12 Grimmauld Place

Date: Saturday, 31 July

Time: 8:00 evening

In lieu of gifts, please consider a donation to

the Hogwarts War Orphans Scholarship Fund

RSVP

As Hermione pondered the invitation, a raven landed on the window ledge and announced his presence with a sharp **CAW!**

Hermione jumped in front of Crookshanks, knowing this was the missive she awaited. The raven dropped the stiff note he carried as soon as Hermione presented him with a scrap of toast.

Her bitter familiar watched the window close and potential prey elude him for the second time that morning. He demanded his mistress' attention by rubbing against her legs as she sat at her table and read the sharp spiky letters.

Miss Granger,

Upon considering your proposal, I unexpectedly find myself amenable to the possibilities of your assistance.

John Rylands Library, Historic Reading Room

This Wednesday, 9:05a.m.

Return message if unacceptable with alternative.

SS

~~SSHG~~

Hermione had never travelled to Manchester before, yet she had heard of the Rylands Library and looked forward to exploring it after her meeting concluded. To facilitate her comfort, but keep an appropriate businesslike quality to her appearance, she chose to don an outfit similar to traditional riding apparel for the day.

After checking in with the Library's reception desk, Hermione Granger made her way to the Reading Room. Even though she spotted Severus Snape waiting for her at the farthest table, her eyes could not stop taking in the stacks and stacks of book one floor above or the treasured, ancient texts, displayed and preserved under glass and mere inches from her fingertips. She slowly made her way to him while espying her next vacation destination.

~~SSHG~~

Severus noticed her from a distance. He had been trying to distance his thoughts from the dreams that had haunted him most nights since their meeting. He immediately knew today would test his perseverance. She was slowly approaching him, yet ignoring him, aloof and disinterested. Though conservative in dress, her fashion screamed sex in his deprived brain. Certainly, the houndstooth blazer and crisp white blouse were acceptable. However, the tight tan breeches and the brown boots which hugged the tops of her knees were most distracting, an attire that begged for a caress of her lower thighs. A stiff crop had to be hiding somewhere in the close-fitting garments.

He quickly grew uncomfortable with his decision to meet her. Severus stood as she drew near. His discomfiture played out in his greeting. "Miss Granger, I had no idea a library would be all it took to quiet your questioning nature."

Slightly irritated by his jab at her inquisitive nature, Hermione replied, "I've always loved books. I've never been here before, and I'm trying to take in as much as possible. I definitely plan to spend more time here in the near future just for my enjoyment."

Severus considered the way his former student had always referred to her texts to support her unsolicited answers in class. "Well then, it seems I've chosen a mutually acceptable meeting place." The Muffliato was cast this time by Severus. "Sit, Miss Granger, I am curious to hear what you have considered on my behalf."

Hermione sat at the table and withdrew a Muggle notebook from the leather messenger bag that had been draped across her torso. Pulling out a Biro, she began with her first bullet on the list. "Mr. Snape, it is my intention to promote you as an acceptable member of wizarding society. I hope to restore your good name in the public forum and thus restore your potions business. The business's success could be not only for your profit but for the gain of society. I believe we can systematically achieve these goals over the course of two years.

"First, I'll promote you as an acceptable member of wizarding society. Please note I did not state the goal as a promotion of you being an Order of Merlin recipient and war hero. All I am hoping to achieve is the possibility of rehabilitating your presence to our world. I want you to be able to walk the streets of Hogsmeade - or wherever you wish - without the risk of being hexed or verbally harassed. I plan to achieve this goal within four months' time.

"Second, I seek to restore your good name in the public forum. Once we have achieved our first goal, the second goal can be segued into with a great deal less opposition. Once again, I don't plan to promote any hero status through this goal. My objective is to have our population remember who you are: an accomplished Potions master and respected academic.

"Finally, I seek to restore your potions trade to a successful business. You have already said you do not care if any achievement of monetary profit results from these efforts. I believe that society can benefit greatly from your high-quality production along with your research and development for new potions. How do you feel about my proposal?"

Randy as a Rough Fell ram surrounded by a herd of ewes in estrus, Severus thought, followed quickly by, *What the bloody hell is happening here?* Severus closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then slowly replied, "Miss Granger, I don't particularly care for your primary or secondary goal. However, I believe your third goal is acceptable. I have a compelling need to provide reparations to Wizarding England, but their acceptance must also be necessary. I understand that even if I don't like them, goals one and two are necessary. I shall concede to them as well."

"Great!" Hermione beamed. "Since you are in agreement, I'll spell out my course of action to achieve goal one. We must find reason for you to be present in society more. And we have to neutralize the public's opinion of you. Tell me, Professor, what catalysts in potions produce a neutral result?"

Snape sneered. "Miss Granger, do you think I've already forgotten my remedial potions properties? Acidic and base combinations are necessary for neutral results."

"Of course I don't question your intelligence. But that example is what we need. The public perceives you as acid. I, however, can play the role of base. Our presence together will neutralize public opinion. Fortunately for you I have the perfect place to begin. I need an escort to Harry's birthday party in one week's time."

Bloody. Bugging. Hell.

Chapter 10 - The Party

Chapter 11 of 17

A grumpy house-elf, an uncomfortable former spy, and black toenails add up to a little bit of fun.

Chapter 11 – The Party

Understanding the importance of pretense under the circumstances, Severus looked at Hermione and extended his elbow in her direction. He had been wearing his customary black formal robes for the occasion, but when he had met Miss Granger outside of her Muggle flat, she had decided to bring him inside for a quick review and modification.

"Mr. Snape, I think for this evening we should present a degree of comfortable familiarity. I'd prefer if you call me Hermione. May I call you Severus?"

Severus had not heard his given name spoken from female lips since his tenure at Hogwarts, prior to his time as Headmaster, and then only from Minerva, Pomona and his female peers. Hermione's use of it made him feel slightly uncomfortable. "Yes, Hermione, that is acceptable."

Hermione offered a slight grin. "I'm having a glass of wine before we leave. Would you care for one as well? It may help you feel more at ease."

Severus nodded and accepted the glass, enjoying its bouquet before sipping its warmth.

"Now, Severus, I hope you trust me. Your customary black robes need a change. That color makes you somewhat unapproachable. Will you allow me to transfigure just the color?"

Of course the black makes me unapproachable. That's the bloody point, Severus thought. But he was willing to concede to her suggestion and gave a curt nod.

Hermione applied the appropriate *swish and flick* of her wand, and the robes were changed to a deep green hue. Not so bright or pale to offend him, and not so dark to intimidate others. Another *swish and flick* and the robes' trim and buttons changed to thin accents of brown leather. The robes parted at his knee, exposing brown cotton slacks.

Hermione motioned to the door. "I think we're ready. Are you up to this?"

Severus gave another nod and a nervous grin. "Let's get this over with."

~~SSHG~~

"Offer me your arm, Severus," Hermione gently suggested as they approached the steps leading to Grimmauld Place's front door.

Severus did so, and Hermione reached under with her left hand, knocking at the door with her right.

Within moments Kreacher opened the door, bowing low and extending a greeting. "Welcome to the Noble House of Potter. Guests are expected in the library." The graveling hiss of Kreacher's words confirmed to Hermione that she would still not have been welcomed if he had his way.

Hermione was careful to maintain a demeanor that would make both Severus comfortable and communicate to the other guests that he was no threat. She drew her right hand to cover her left at his elbow and entered the home with a smile on her face and her charge by her side.

Severus reminded himself that he had faced many more dangerous situations and allowed her to lead them to the party.

~~SSHG~~

"Hermione, Mr. Snape, welcome!" A very pregnant Ginny Potter came to greet her guests as they entered the home.

Hermione had written to Harry and advised him she would be bringing Severus as her guest and reminded him of his promise to help her in her endeavor. Harry told her it would be a small informal affair with only the Weasleys, Kingsley, and possibly Minerva in attendance.

Ginny had been filled in on those details and did everything she could to show the other guests that Severus was most welcome in their home. "You look smashing, Hermione! I love your robes."

Severus had thought the same when he had met Hermione earlier. She had donned a midnight-blue dress robe, not too extravagant yet not too casual. She accented its high neckline with a cabochon emerald stone set in gold. The brooch's kelly-green color and bright yellow setting looked striking against the dark palette of the robe. Replacing the boots that haunted his dreams were strappy high heels, and a glimpse of her toes and ankles peeked under the flow of her gown. He didn't miss that her nails had been painted black. An unguarded thought registered, *I imagine those toes might taste of licorice.*

Hermione gave her friend a hug and a kiss. "Thank you for inviting us. Mr. Snape and I are looking forward to spending time with you and your family."

As luck would have it, when Severus gave his nod to Ginny, the boy-who-simply-would-not-go-away made his way across the room.

"Hermione! Mr. Snape! I'm so glad you made it! Come on in."

"I wouldn't miss it, Mr. Potter. I'm glad Hermione invited me to escort her this evening." Severus' statement had been coached by Hermione earlier, and the deliberate use of her given name was noticed by everyone.

"I see you and your family are doing well." These platitudes were not easy for Severus to express, but his years as a spy had honed his acting abilities.

"We are, Prof... Mr. Snape. Um, we're having pre-dinner drinks in the library. Would you care to join us?"

Severus looked at Hermione, and her smile indicated her approval. Severus nodded to Harry, "Lead the way."

~~SSHG~~

The evening had gone very well, better than Hermione had expected. Only she, Harry and Kingsley were privy to the proofs of Severus' acquittal. Yet by the end of the party, everyone had spoken with him, if not with warm familiarity at least with proper cordiality. Molly had gone so far as to hug him, and Arthur had invited him to the Burrow for dinner and conversation whenever he wished.

Leaving Grimmauld Place and heading across the street to the Apparition Point, they continued the formal escort with her hand at his elbow. They both tried to convince themselves it was for appearances only. Yet neither knew the other was thinking the same thing: *This is nice.* Though it wasn't necessary, Severus offered to escort her home. Hermione accepted.

~~SSHG~~

"I want to thank you, Hermione. This evening was not as unpleasant as I had expected. To the best of my knowledge, none of my beverages were poisoned by the other guests."

"Severus, you may not realize this, but we did make progress tonight. Even though this was a private event, you were accepted by the Weasleys, Kingsley, and the others in attendance. We should try to continue to make an appearance at least once a week over the next month in a similar fashion and see how that acceptance transfers to everyone else."

"I would not be opposed to this. You will owl me with your next plans?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes. You did well, Severus. Thank you for trying." She extended her right hand to shake his but he took it in his left, bent slightly and brought her hand to his lips.

Even though his formal kiss on the top of her fingertips didn't last but a brief second, time for both of them stood still. As his lips drew close to her knuckles, they felt a surge of magic pull each towards the other just as a magnet draws to steel. Their surreal moment was quickly disrupted by the 'snap' and flash of a camera's light and the 'pop' of a quick Apparition.

A/N - Thank you, Dreamy_Dragon!

Chapter 11 - Bella Sera

Chapter 12 of 17

Hermione and Severus meet again. Checkered tablecloths and Chianti bottle candles set the mood.

Sunday morning's headlines screamed:

SNAPE ENSNARES GRANGER!

The *Sunday Prophet* shelled out extra Galleons to print the photo in full color, making certain the vivid image of Snape and Granger caught people's eyes. Their robes stood out on the page, and the whites of their eyes flashed as both quickly turned to the camera after the kiss.

The facts of the story were as reliable as Pettigrew's confidence. Rita Skeeter speculated on everything from Severus' change of wardrobe being used as a poor disguise to Hermione's desperate desire to leave spinsterhood behind and return to her forbidden lover. A follow-up was promised for the Monday edition.

Monday's story was much more factual with a reminder of Snape's pardon and his status as an Order of Merlin, First Class recipient. Most people missed that story, though, as it was printed on page four, bottom left corner, and sandwiched between ads for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and O'Leary's Ordinary Owl Pellets.

~~SSHG~~

A week had passed since Hermione Granger and Severus Snape had become front page fodder. Both had spent the week keeping a low profile in the privacy of their homes.

Severus spent Monday and Tuesday suffering through no less than seven Howlers. He accepted their arrivals as the punishment he deserved for straying from his path of penitence. They brought such a damper to his mood that he couldn't even be bothered about the quick wank, which he had recently made a habit prior to the party. Hermione, on the other hand, spent the week plotting, designing ways to turn Skeeter's negative press into a positive.

~~SSHG~~

Severus was pleased to see Hermione's penmanship on the morning's only post instead of another anonymous banshee-inspired letter.

2 August

Severus,

I believe it is time we meet again to discuss our next steps towards our goal. Would you be available for dinner on Thursday? I am thinking we may try Rosmearta's Trattoria Romano outside of Dumfries. I am anxious to see if her foray into international cuisine is as good as they say.

Please owl back to confirm a seven o'clock meeting.

HG

2 August

Hermione,

Thursday is acceptable. I hope that your steps include a method to counteract any negative attention which you are certainly suffering as a result of our recent media exposure.

SS

~~SSHG~~

When Severus arrived at the trattoria, he found Hermione had already commanded a table for two next to a window. Their view looked over the streets of the small wizarding neighborhood. A small candle on the table cast a soft light on Hermione, making her features appear more delicate than her tightly twisted coif and high-necked grey robes attempted to hide. Her glance in his direction brought a small smile, and he found it difficult not to return a smile to her.

"I see you are no worse for wear from the aftermath of last week's attention, Severus. Thank you for coming."

"I must admit, I've received no less than seven howlers in as many days. Their dulcet words have kept me company each morning."

Hermione let out a soft laugh at his comment. Immediately, she cataloged his sense of humor as a possible tool for marketing her client.

"Severus, would you look over the menu? I want you to order for the both of us, please."

Just as he had finished deciding their meal, their waitress approached the table. Severus vaguely recognized the girl, but offered no greeting. "We will begin with the *crostini di pollo* and *fagioli al fiasco*; my companion will have the *costatine di agnello montalbano*, and I'll have the *arista di cinghiale*. We'll have *asparagi* and potatoes as sides, and a bottle of Amarone for the table."

As the waitress walked away with the menu, Severus noted "She seems somewhat familiar."

"She should. That's Martine Copplestone, Hufflepuff. One year behind me."

"This isn't good. I remember her taking potions but not past O.W.L.S. I was pleased she was a poor student. Her constant gossiping was disruptive during class. I suppose with her habit, we should expect to see Skeeter walk through the door at any moment."

"That might not be such a bad thing, Severus. Remember, the point of all this is marketing your image. The Muggles have a saying: 'no publicity is bad publicity.' Truth is, I was hoping by suggesting dinner here that someone may notice us dining together."

Indeed, within the course of eight minutes, Martine had bragged to the cook that the duplicitous Snape and gullible Granger were at her table. The cook then joked with the maître d' that Snape had chosen the wild boar for dinner, instead of a tamer meat. The maître d' had advised Madam Rosmeartha via Floo that Snape and Granger were in her restaurant. Madam Rosmeartha sent her Patronus to Rita Skeeter with the news, hoping to get free publicity for her new establishment.

Rita Skeeter Apparated to the lane one block away. In her great excitement as she transformed into her lovely beetle persona to avoid detection, she didn't notice the village drunk stumbling into the lane for a wee. Before she could take flight, his heavy step squashed her into the cobblestone street, and Rita Skeeter was heard from no more.

~~SSHG~~

Oblivious to the drama that occurred a mere block from their table, Hermione and Severus settled into an enjoyable meal and conversation.

"That's my intention, Severus. I experienced no repercussions from the photo. It was only you who did. Given the way people feel and act towards both of us, we can neutralize their negative opinion of you. Base and acid, right?"

"I can see that as a result. It would feel *bizarreto* walk the streets and not be shunned or worse. And I must say, that's more than I deserve."

Hermione hid her shock at his statement. Those eight words revealed more about Severus Snape than he had ever revealed to the Dark Lord via Legillimencys. She was surprised he had let his guard down with her.

"Severus, I mentioned before, your intentions are your own. I would never demand anything from you that you don't want to share. But if the time comes, know that you can tell me anything you wish in confidence. Over this past month I've come to consider you my friend, and I am very loyal to my friends."

This time it was Severus who drew a breath at her words. No one besides Lily and Lucius had ever called him a friend.

A/N – Thank you to everyone following this story and your kind reviews!

Chapter 12 - Realization

Chapter 13 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

The next three weeks passed quickly. Hermione continued to make certain she and Severus were seen publicly in a variety of places in wizarding England. Diagon Alley was visited twice. The first trip began with lunch at the Leaky Cauldron followed by a few hours browsing in Flourish and Blotts, then popping into Ollivanders for a quick "hello." The second trip began with a visit to Gringotts to assess the assets of Severus' recently growing account, a drop by the Magical Menagerie to pick up catnip for Crookshanks, a break at Florean Fortescue's for ice cream, and finally a stroll through Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

Severus didn't much care for Fortescue's but definitely preferred it over WWW.

Hermione had insisted each establishment was important to visit, and no visits were rushed. Scowls were prohibited.

According to his public relations agent, the goal was not to shop, but to desensitize the public to Severus' presence in society. Purchases would be made, though, not because the items were needed, but because by patronizing a retailer, that retailer would now hold a subconscious 'vested interest' in Severus as a client. Even though they received a number of stares and noticed hushed whispers, they carried their heads high and spent their time outwardly enjoying their excursions.

Severus' favorite afternoon was spent at a Quidditch match between the Montrose Magpies and Puddlemere United. Hermione showed signs of merely tolerating the game, but she still insisted the variety of their excursions would only add to their goal. It had been years since he had been Head of Slytherin and had the opportunity to watch a game. He had not enjoyed a game without reserve since he was a student. When Puddlemere Chaser Quinn Quickly successfully maneuvered a Wronski Feint causing Magpies Chaser Devon McDonough to tumble across the pitch, Severus jumped to his feet with the crowd, spilling Butterbeer over Hermione's lap and cheering his excitement. Hermione quickly Evanescoded the mess and didn't even mind. To see a withdrawn Severus Snape exhibit such normal and unrestrained behavior in public was a miracle indeed.

Severus felt a long forgotten giddiness in his gut after participating in the high spirits of the match, and for the first time in a few weeks, he was nervous as he escorted Hermione back to her flat. Even though each time they returned, their Homenum Revelio never showed any signs of Skeeter lurking around, he couldn't imagine that after his behavior at the match no one would follow them through the evening. When they walked to the door, Severus gathered all of his courage.

"Hermione, would it be rude of me to ask to be invited in for tea? I'm hoping we could talk in private."

Hermione looked up to Severus and suddenly rubbed her left wrist. "Certainly, Severus. Consider yourself invited. Follow me."

The two were greeted by a possessive Crookshanks. The familiar circled his witch's legs while casting a predatory glare towards her companion. Severus thought the Kneazle would make a good dust mop if push came to shove.

"Severus, have a seat over here while I feed Crooks and put the tea on. I won't be a minute."

As Hermione escaped to the kitchen with the feline following closely behind, Severus took in the small sitting area of Hermione's home. A comfortable Muggle style sofa faced a table across the room upon which a telly sat with a grey face. Lining the walls on either side of the telly were strange shaped bookshelves, not built into the walls, but standing alone in a way he had not seen before. Every shelf was crammed full of tomes, shelved by subject, then alphabetically by author. The tops of the shelves held a number of unsorted books that had no room to fit in with their brethren, and a couple of paperbacks sat on the coffee table before the sofa. Sensing no adverse magic in the books, Severus closed his eyes, dragged a finger across the spines, and randomly chose a book he could tell was bound in leather. Pulling the book out, he brought it to his nose, taking in the binding and the old leaves. He let his fingers pull the pages open at an undetermined spot, opened his eyes and took in the words.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,

I all alone beweep my outcast state,

*And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Feature'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;*

For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

While Hermione's voice could be heard from the kitchen, talking to her pet and humming a sweet tune, Severus stood staring at the page with his heart beating wildly in his chest. He knew Shakespeare, and knew the man must have had ten-fold the Divination skills of Trelawney. No other reasons could have fated those exact words, at this exact time, on this randomly chosen book and its randomly chosen page.

Higher Powers than Merlin had brought Severus to the revelation that his disgrace and loathing were of his own making. He could hope to have the life others enjoyed. And the person who brought this realization to him was none other than Hermione Granger, who Shakespeare identified as none less than his 'sweet love'.

His eyes were opened for the first time in his life. He could be loved, someone taught him he deserved love, and he was falling for the witch.

~~SSHG~~

Hermione walked into the room, levitating a full tea tray in front of her. Severus stepped towards her and placed the set on the coffee table, opening the space between them. He looked at her sweet face, taking in the hazel eyes, her pert nose, and those beautiful lips.

"Well, Severus, I'm very happy with the way this afternoon went. What is it you wanted to speak about?"

Severus sat, looking into Hermione's eyes. He drew a deep breath to center himself. "Hermione, I'm sorry. I find that I cannot continue with your plan."

A/N –The italicized passage is William Shakespeare's Sonnet 29. Thank you, Dreamy_Dragon. You are the best beta in all of fanfiction!

Chapter 13 - Confrontation

Chapter 14 of 17

Severus learns more about Hermione and her shame.

Hermione stood before Severus and blinked in confusion.

"What do you mean, you cannot continue with my plan?"

"It's not that difficult to comprehend. I need to bring this pleasant farce to an end."

Hermione grasped her left arm. Her right thumb dug furiously into the fabric as she attempted to relieve the growing itch beneath her sleeve. "Severus, this is no farce. This is your life and my business. How could you call this a farce? I have a stack of notes detailing the change of public perception, and all data indicates my first goal will be accomplished before the four months allocated to it are over."

"Ms. Granger, I've come to certain realizations. I have my own agenda, and this public relations game hinders them."

Hermione began to scratch furiously at her scar. Severus noticed the tears as they began to pool at the corners of her eyes.

"Ms. Granger? I'm Ms. Granger now? Severus, this is not a 'game' for me. You at least owe me an explanation of your agenda."

In three steps, Severus crossed to Hermione and grasped her wrist, holding her arm away from her body. "Why the bloody hell are you always attempting to scar yourself? You worry this wrist every time you are anxious. Let me see the rash – I will send you a salve for it."

The word "scar" caused Hermione to jump. In her panic, she wrenched her wrist from his grasp, twisting with such quick force that she knocked over the tea service. The contents fell to the floor and created a sloppy mess.

"I'm fine. I don't have a rash. Just don't grab me again."

Severus regarded her actions and knew something was amiss. "Hermione, what happened to you? Something doesn't add up here. Please, let me see your wrist. The least I can do to repay your kindness is to help relieve your pain."

Hermione sat on her sofa, pointed her wand at the mess and Evanesco'ed everything from the floor.

"Severus, you cannot relieve my pain any more than I can convince you to allow me to continue this plan."

Severus sat to the left of her. Using his voice to soothe and comfort her, he quietly whispered, "Show me."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't. I can't. I just can't, Severus. You have to understand." Tears slowly trailed down her cheek.

"If you can't show me, will you tell me? Will you describe your symptoms for me?"

With a quivering chin and reddening nose, Hermione shook her head.

"Hermione, something is causing you great pain. I'm not so oblivious as to ignore this. If you can't show me, or relate to me your cause of discomfort, will you give me permission to look for myself?"

Hermione's disfigurements had weighed upon her consciousness for two years. She was tired of hiding within her shell. Considering he was ending their public relations campaign and would never see her again, she gritted her teeth and nodded.

"Hermione, look at me."

Expecting Severus to push her sleeve to her elbow, she was caught off guard by his whisper.

"Legilimens."

The first thing Severus could see was that she had not expected this and was slightly perturbed. Under that emotion, he easily uncovered the image of what upset her so much.

He could see a young woman, barely past schoolgirl innocence, lying upon the parquet floor of Malfoy mansion's drawing room. Bellatrix Lestrange circled her like a vulture, cackling and spitting manic vitriol. Why wasn't Hermione fighting? Oh... Crucio. Several bouts. He could feel the warm dampness in her knickers as the stench of urine rose to his nose. He could feel the sting of the curse travel through her limbs to her extremities. Weasley and Potter were yelling in the dungeon. He experienced the quick, sharp pain of Bellatrix's curse down through Hermione's abdomen. Bile pushed through her throat to escape from chapped and broken lips.

Even with this torture, Severus could feel a sense of resolve and knew Hermione was still prepared to fight.

Hermione's sleeve was torn from her, exposing her left arm to the cool air of the ballroom. "You filthy MUDBLOOD! How DARE you even attempt to breathe the same air as me! You have one more chance, Bitch. HOW DID YOU GET THAT SWORD!"

Hermione looked into Bellatrix's crazy eyes. With a steady aim, she spit bile and blood straight into them.

What happened next was somewhat hazy, but Severus could feel the slap of a hand across her cheek. Did she pass out? The blackness was quickly dispelled when a burning pressure cut into the soft inner skin of her arm.

Time stood still as the pain of being carved alive continued. A wand was slicing raggedly into her arm, and it felt as if red coals were burrowing beneath her skin.

He followed Hermione's gaze when Bellatrix jumped back, a sick smile etched on her face. There upon Hermione's arm, torn into fleshy strips, was the branding. MUDBLOOD.

~~SSHG~~

Severus gently pulled away from her mind. He maintained eye contact with her as he cradled her arm in his hands. Gently, oh so slowly, he released the buttons of her cuff.

He watched for any reaction as he continued. All he saw was a straight face with tear-filled eyes holding his gaze.

He gently held her wrist in his left hand, and with his right, slowly brought her sleeve towards her elbow. When he knew it was uncovered, he lowered his eyes to the scar.

There it was. It was as ugly as his tattoo, which still reminded him of choices fools often make during the desperation of youth. Yet, this scar was almost as red as the day it was created. The Dark magic imbedded in her skin would certainly haunt her for years to come.

He understood more than Hermione could ever imagine. Here he was, scarred on the inside by his crimes, demanding discipline from society, and there she was, scarred on the outside, trying her best to make the world a more beautiful place.

Still holding her wrist in his hand, Severus looked back at Hermione's eyes. He slipped back into her mind as he brought her arm towards his lips.

"You are beautiful, Hermione. You are beautiful. You are beautiful to me, Hermione."

The mantra filled her mind and soul as his lips pressed to each letter, caressing each scar, filling her with his regard.

~~SSHG~~

Hermione felt herself slipping into a most enjoyable dream.

What had started as a nightmare, reliving her capture and torture, was turning into a fulfillment of her recent fantasies. Severus Snape was ministering to her physically and emotionally damaged body.

Quiet words whispered against her arm and all sensations of discomfort were dispelled. She watched his eyes, and he held her in his. There was no threat in them. There was no distaste.

She wanted his lips to stay on her tender skin. Forever.

Severus pulled away from her arm and reached for her damp cheek.

"Do you understand what I am trying to tell you, Hermione? Do you understand you do not need to hide yourself from me? Do not doubt, witch, you are most beautiful to my eyes."

Emotions churned throughout her soul. Relief replaced shame. Desire replaced disgust. Hope replaced fear.

"Severus, please. I'm so confused. How can you find me beautiful?"

"Witch, you are the strongest, most capable person I have ever met. You are brave. You care so much for the welfare of others. How could I not find you beautiful?"

"But... my arm." Hermione looked to his left hand, still holding her wrist, its thumb slowly tracing circles over her pulse point.

"Your arm is not the definition of who you are, Hermione. It is, however, a sign of the sacrifice you made to ensure our freedom."

Severus brought his right hand back to her arm and slowly dragged his hand from elbow to wrist. "Hermione, I find myself in awe of who you are. Do you not realize why I want to sever our professional relationship? Hermione, I find myself falling in love with you."

A/N – Thank you, everyone, for reading and reviewing this tale of mine. I am sorry to keep you waiting on this update. Thank you, Dreamy_Dragon, for helping me so much!

Chapter 14 - Baring Your Soul

Chapter 15 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

A/N – There is a brief mention of past torture in this chapter. It's brief, but it is harsh. Proceed with caution.

Chapter 14 – Baring Your Soul

For so many months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds, Hermione had convinced herself over and over again that she would never hear the words that flowed from Severus' tender lips. What she dared not say was her realization of the same towards him.

Regaining her composure, Hermione sat up straight and withdrew her arm from his hand. "Severus, then this may be for the best. It would be very inappropriate for us to continue our campaign. One should never mix business with a personal relationship."

"Hermione, do not distance yourself. Do you not long for the same? I want to know you not on a business plane, but on a more personal level – even if it is just a close friendship."

"Severus, what you want cannot be possible. Your world is opening up to new possibilities. There is a witch fated for you who will love you as much as you so deserve. And you do deserve love, Severus. Never doubt you are a good man. You are incredibly brave and risked your life to save ours. You deserve love, Severus, from someone who can return yours freely."

Severus reached for the hand in her lap, but she countered by pulling it away.

"Hermione, what are you not telling me? You deserve love as much as anyone. You deserve a relationship, one I'm willing to try to give you, a companion and a supporter. You deserve someone who may one day give you the family you've lost."

Hermione looked down to her hands. She sat up straight and brought her shoulders back. She drew upon her inner strength before looking into those pleading black eyes.

"That's just it, Severus. I will never have a family. I cannot bear children, and it would be the height of selfishness to toy with a wizard's emotions and not be able to deliver his possible dreams."

~~SSHG~~

"Were you further hurt during the war? Explain to me, please." The look in Severus' eyes held no hint of judgment.

In for a Knut, in for a Galleon Hermione stunned herself imagining this trite saying at a time like this yet it was fitting.

"Severus, my womb was severely damaged twice in the war. In the Department of Mysteries, Antonin Dolohov's curse cut through me, severing and scarring my right Fallopian tube. St. Mungo's was able to correct most of the damage, but then Bellatrix Lestrange ruined me forever.

"What you didn't see is what happened after her 'branding' of my arm. I was helpless to stop her."

Severus watched as Hermione's shoulders began to shake. He wanted so strongly to hold her, protect her, comfort her, but dared not agitate her during this confession.

"Severus, Bellatrix placed my own wand to my stomach. She recited words I've never heard before. They didn't even sound like Latin – they sounded like Greek, but an even older language. I've wondered if it was Babylonian or another ancient language.

"The pain was blinding. She severed my uterus from my body, and then, while I was still wearing my jeans, she drew the organ from my body and forced it into the confines of my clothes. I'm broken beyond repair, Severus. Do not fall in love with me. It would kill me to break your heart in the long run."

~~SSHG~~

Severus had been well aware of Dolohov's wound, but not of the internal damage. The images of Bellatrix's torture were fresh. He wanted to find that damned Resurrection Stone, pull her from her slumber and drop her into a cauldron of acid. Then repeat that action the following week.

His heart broke for Hermione's loss.

"Hermione, *love*, your losses have left your hollow. My feelings have not wavered because of your confession. Let me bring something good back into your world."

~~SSHG~~

His words were filling her with magic, a magic that sung to her heart. Hermione relaxed, looked into Severus' eyes and said the word he longed to hear, "Please."

In less than a second, Severus leaned into Hermione, grasping her neck with his right hand and drawing his face to hers.

His lips were still gentle. They were thin, but his mouth out scaled hers. His first touch encapsulated both of her lips. As they remained closed he slowly pulled back, allowing his lips to drag across hers from outside to center.

He could sense her fear, but she seemed to have the courage to try. She was so alluring. Her eyes remained closed, and an angel's melody came from her lips.

"Please."

Her desperate entreaty pulled at his core, and he promised himself at that moment he would fix any transgressions that had marred her, body and mind. "Hermione, yes. Open yourself to me, love."

With that Hermione leaned into the dark man, and he dragged her across the sofa to rest across his lap. He claimed her mouth once more – this time more daring, wetting her lips with his once acerbic tongue. She parted her lips and pressed against his mouth. Her nimble tongue stroked his teeth, then drew back, daring him to follow her lead.

The tingle of magic being drawn to magic was building between them. The pleasant vibrations began to thrum through them, and the stronger the kisses grew, the stronger the resonations became.

Severus pulled away, only far enough to look into her face. He saw no trace of fear or disgust, only passion. "Do you feel it, Hermione? Don't deny this. Our magics sing to each other."

Before she could respond, he pulled her close, leaning her back and taking command of their embrace. He bent over her, letting his mouth act out the feelings he wanted to share.

Hermione laced her fingers through his long black locks and pulled him hard to her. She was losing her breath, losing her body, losing her mind, losing her fear as she tumbled down this rabbit hole. Once more, she thrust into him, looking to stroke her tongue's match and feel his magic's vibration. This felt like heaven and aroused her more than her dreams ever had.

Severus pulled back once more. "Look at me, Hermione, yes. Do you see a wizard who would reject you? Tell me, love, do you want this as much as I do?"

The fear that had grasped her earlier was a distant memory. Hermione held Severus' head in her hands, brought his face close and taunted him, "See for yourself."

~~SSHG~~

The misery of the manor was nowhere to be seen within Hermione's consciousness. He saw a woman, aroused, emotional, still slightly apprehensive, yet courageous enough to try. He saw her as she worshipped his mouth; he saw her as she sat next to him in companionable silence, and he saw her care for him when he was hurt and broken. These were not past remembrances. These were the fantasies of what was yet to come within her heart.

Severus followed the thread of apprehension, and she stood with her back to him. The mirror before her reflected the scar and its damage. For as alluring and unmarred as her back was, her reflection told another tale. A jagged swath of pink flesh bisected her torso. Instead of two breasts, Hermione carried one full breast and two almost-half orbs. She looked down at her feet in shame.

While still in her mind, Severus slowly reached to the left side of the body across his lap and rested his hand upon her damaged mound. The mirror Hermione tensed, looked away. Severus began to stroke her, cupping her breast in his palm through her heavy robes, letting his fingers tease her, gently kneading while exploring her flesh.

He filled her with his thoughts. "Hermione, let me worship you, my mistress. You are the most gorgeous creature I have ever seen. Allow me to care for you, Hermione."

Mirror Hermione looked back at her reflection, then caught the eyes of the dark figure behind her. She smiled.

Chapter 15 - Consumation

Chapter 16 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

"Yes," Hermione whispered. She was ready, she was strong, she was brave.

More importantly, as Severus explored her thoughts, she could feel the sincerity in his words and knew he would not reject her. He slipped from her mind, and she sat up in his lap.

"Come with me. I think we will be more comfortable elsewhere." She stood and looked demurely over her shoulder towards him.

~~SSHG~~

When they reached her bedroom, Hermione turned and stepped into his arms once again.

"Severus, I will not hold it against you if you change your mind."

He answered with a stroke of her cheek and a drag of his hand to the buttons high upon the back of her neck.

He kept her in his sights as he deftly unbuttoned her robes, slowly dragging his fingers across her skin with each pass.

Hermione welcomed the feeling of his magic as it hummed so closely to her spine. Her core was tingling, and she felt the anticipation build within her.

Severus touched her shoulders and gently turned her so her back was to him. As he continued the unclasping of the row of buttons down her back, he rested his lips against her skin and whispered to her, "Hermione, I will show you how I feel. Your place will be upon a throne, and I shall sit at your feet. I will guard and protect you. I will act upon every command you give me."

As Severus reached the small of her exposed back, he stepped up to her, pressing his body into her. His right hand came forward to stroke her throat, and his left hand slid the sleeve of her robe from her shoulder.

And there he felt it. The top end of her scar. He turned her back to face him and continued his chant. "Thank you. Thank you for bestowing this honor upon me, Hermione. I will never give you a reason to doubt my feelings."

~~SSHG~~

Hermione felt as if she would crawl out of her skin. Severus was so patient, so tender, so *loving*, and his words and actions gave her the strength to know she could do this. Her arousal had been building since their kisses on the sofa. His undressing of her made her feel as if she were a powerful force.

"Please, Severus, let me touch your skin. Merlin, I need you."

Her command was all it took. He pulled his wand, and their clothes were quickly strewn in a pile across the room.

Hermione backed towards her bed and sat on its edge. Before her was a man, as far from perfect as she. His long, sinewed body was covered in scars, and his slender legs could use a little more weight. To her eyes he was beautiful and broken, yet resilient. Is this how he saw her?

~~SSHG~~

She crawled across her bed and turned to face him.

"Tell me again, Severus. I need to hear it."

"A thousand times, witch. I cannot tear my eyes from you. I will show you."

With that, Severus lay by to her side. Exhaling deeply, he traced her collarbones with his deft fingertips, his gaze following the trail. He leaned down to sample her soft, sweet skin, and his tongue filled the beautiful hollow where those bones met.

Issuing a quiet mewl, Hermione reached up to his head and began to massage his scalp.

Encouraged by her reaction, Severus resumed his cupping of her damaged flesh, enjoying the sensation of bare skin beneath his hand. Hoping not to frighten his witch, he traced his finger from the top of the breast's scar to the flesh beneath, all the while watching her face for traces of discomfort.

She wantonly arched her back, demanding his caress.

Needing no further encouragement, Severus brought his lips to her torn nipple and began lathing her pebbled skin. He reached for her right breast and gently, *oh, so gently* pinched her erect nipple.

"So good, Severus. So good..." Hermione's breath began escalating, and her hips ground into his erection. Her pubis felt warm and moist, and he twitched against her in anticipation.

"Please, love, let me touch you," she begged. With that, Hermione pushed herself up whilst pressing Severus back into her bed.

"It's been so long for me, Severus. I never thought I would enjoy this again." She smirked down at his languid face. "I have a secret... I've dreamt of this. You and I. I've dreamt of this over the past two months."

Severus could not hide the surprise on his face. "Tell me, Hermione. I want to know your dreams."

Hermione bent her waist, and Severus couldn't help but be intrigued at the dimple that formed under her ribs. Just as he reached to touch that spot of skin, he felt her breath upon his cock.

His sac tingled as her nose inhaled the scent of manhood.

"Just as I dreamt. You smell divine... you smell of tea, spices, leather."

~~SSHG~~

Hermione was overwhelmed by the wizard's attention. His actions empowered her. She felt bold, strong, brave. She had not felt this way since the exhilaration of the final battle. She could conquer the world.

Her explorations continued. She licked her lips, then dragged her tongue from the base of his cock to his glans. She took him in hand and dragged his foreskin back, feasting upon each spot of skin.

He gasped as she filled her mouth with his body. She used her tongue to tease the underside of his sensitive tip.

It was his turn to reach to her now loosening mane, and he growled as his hand struggled to pull pins from her hair.

"Hermione, please, if you don't stop, this will end before it begins." He clasped her chin and lifted her eyes to his.

Hermione crawled up his torso before lying once more by his side. She took his hand in hers and kissed his knuckles. Then she brought his hand to rest against her vulva.

The heat between her legs felt inviting to his fingers. He stroked her, dragging his middle finger from the tip of her hood to the base of her vagina. He coaxed her, whispered her name, told her what a good witch she was. His finger finally reached inside and her walls constricted at his touch. Her instinct took over and enflamed her desire.

Because of her torture, he had wondered if the dampness would be there still. It most definitely was. He was going to need a towel at this rate. Years of pent-up passion were spilling from her.

He leaned into a kiss, and as his tongue traced her throat, he pulled his finger from her body and encircled her stiff little clit. Her unexpectant gasp was his confirmation he was touching her the way she wished.

Hermione grabbed his shoulder and rolled onto her side. The wanton minx was rubbing herself up and down his arm, biting his shoulder and riding his hand.

"Oh, Gods, Severus, I'm coming, I'm coming, please don't..."

He felt her shiver before she could finish her sentence. As her pussy clasped his fingers, he pressed her once more onto her back. He knelt over her and positioned himself between her legs.

"Last chance, Hermione. Say the word and break my heart, but remain unscathed. Give me reason to stay and beware the consequences of associating with an evil man."

~~SSHG~~

His words pulled at her heart. Did he really think so poorly of himself? She knew she had nothing to fear from him. She knew all she needed to know. She loved him, she cared for him, and he reciprocated those tender emotions.

Hermione brought her knees up on either side of Severus, planting her feet firmly upon the mattress. She reached between their sweating bodies and pressed his cock to her cunt.

He pushed swift and hard, sheathing himself within her. This was where he should be. The world melted away, and all that mattered was the smiling woman beneath him. Her mouth opened in a soft "ah", then she closed her eyes, tilting her head back and exposing her throat to him. A treat, if ever there was one. As he pulled his hips back, he bent to smell the skin of her neck. Lovely.

Severus leaned over her, a hand supporting him on either side of her neck. He reached to her left knee and dragged her leg over his hip. He rocked deeply into her, feeling the scarred closure at the top of her channel, where softer muscle would normally be found.

He concentrated, taking his time, watching her expressions and exploring her pussy with his cock. He wanted to know every inch of her, inside and out. When he was satisfied he had mapped her territory, he reached for her headboard and pulled her further towards it.

"Place your legs around me, love. I am going to fuck your pretty body so well that you will never want to leave this bed." The moment her ankles crossed at the small of his back, Severus grabbed a pillow, then lifter her slightly and placed a pillow under her hips. Satisfied she was comfortable, he began thrusting rhythmically into her.

The swifter his tempo, the harder he fell. Somewhere in his periphery he heard Hermione moan, chant his name, demand *faster, harder, faster* and felt her nails scratch across his chest.

This was what he longed for, and he obeyed. Severus gritted his teeth, ignored the desire to prolong the inevitable, surrendered to the magic flowing from her to him, and allowed his orgasm to cataclysmically shatter their world.

A/N - My deep gratitude to my beta, Dreamy_Dragon. Not mine, no profit.

Chapter 17 - Cleansing

Chapter 17 of 17

Snape is in a bad place following the war. Hermione wants to help. Can they find enough in common to become friends, maybe more?

Severus was enjoying the most realistic dream. His lips were pressed into the back of his mistress's neck, and vanilla filled the air. Her skin was warm and supple. He relished its texture on his tongue.

He could hear her sounds in the distance. It was almost as if she were attempting to coax him from a decadent dream.

"MMMMMMMM," Hermione purred. She shifted in his arms and opened her sleep-shut eyes to gaze upon the wizard lying next to her. A soft kiss to the tip of his nose awoke her sleeping prince.

Hermione giggled as she stroked his cheek, willing him to fully awaken. "You must be hungry. I was beginning to fear you would make a snack out of my neck."

"What time is it?" he growled.

"Early. It's only six in the morning. Shall I make you some breakfast?"

"Only if you're on the menu. And I like my meat prepared rare."

Her smile lit the room. "Let me throw on a dressing gown. Give me fifteen minutes, and I'll have coffee, eggs and bangers ready for you."

As she threw her legs to the side of the bed and sat up, Severus grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back to him. She giggled like a Hufflepuff.

"Let me feast on you, Hermione. I can't imagine anything you prepare for breakfast will taste as good as this toe does." He sat up and grabbed her right ankle. He brought her foot to his mouth and gently began suckling upon her big toe. She responded by placing her left foot upon his shoulder and giving him a nice little shove.

"Seriously, Severus, I haven't eaten since the Quidditch match. I'm famished!" And with that she sauntered to the kitchen while Severus was left to ponder upon the most pleasing situation he had been in for quite some time.

~~SSHG~~

She fed him the most delicious meal of eggs, sausages, toast and rich coffee he could remember. As she set the dishes to washing, he stepped behind her. He drew his arms possessively around her waist and pulled her back to his chest.

Severus nuzzled Hermione's head. His lips brushed the shell of her ear as he whispered, "Thank you. I'm finding myself a changed man this morning, Hermione. I'm even thinking this may be a good thing."

Hermione twisted in his grasp and brought her arms around his neck. "Thank you, Severus. I'm finding myself somewhat changed as well. It feels... frightening, but good."

As Severus looked down into her eyes, he felt his cock twitching to life. "Hermione, even if I never find the courage to make a change outside of these walls, I do want to embrace this change in our private homes." His hands moved to her waist, and he lifted her from her feet, placing her to sit upon the counter behind her.

Hermione was now face-to-face with her dark wizard. As she took his head in her hands, she opened her thighs so he could stand between them. Hermione leaned into him and initiated their kiss, gently suckling his lower lip as she scratched the nape of his neck.

Severus pulled away. "Enough. You and I have enjoyed enough of this nonsense. We should attend to other matters before the morning ends."

Hermione pulled back and looked at him quizzically. Had she misunderstood anything that had transpired?

With a flick of his wand, Hermione felt a sense of weightlessness fall upon her. Severus again took her by the waist and easily lifted her from the counter. He tossed her over a shoulder and turned towards her stairs.

"Put me down! What are you doing?" Hermione's giggles and demands were only met by his gruff "Hrummph."

"Calm yourself, Hermione. I will not have you concuss your head with your squirming. I need you aware and cognizant if I am to enjoy your company."

Hermione relaxed and smirked as she watched the kitchen and sitting room disappear. As Severus began to ascend the stairs, she took the opportunity to reach down and grasp his left buttock.

Severus was quick to respond with a nibble to her thigh and a chuckle from his lips.

Severus Snape chuckled.

"Watch your head, love." Severus warned her as he stepped into the loo. He brought her to her feet and released his spell.

"You and I are going to freshen up. We have much to do today."

"Severus, I have nothing on our agenda today. Let's just stay here and relax."

"As I said, silly girl, we have much to do today." He reached to the Muggle bathtub and turned on the faucets.

Hermione smiled as she understood his intention. "Severus, I left my wand in the kitchen. Will you enlarge the tub? I want to share it with you."

"I most certainly will not. We will be sharing our bath, but I see no reason I would want to enlarge the tub. You will be allowed no room to move away from me."

They both disrobed. Severus held out his hand and took Hermione's as she gingerly stepped into the tub. Severus joined her, his back to the faucet and knobs. "I'll sit first, then you can join me".

Once he was settled, Hermione bent her knees. "I can't do this," she giggled. "I'm going to slip. There isn't enough room!"

Severus grabbed her arms and pulled her down. Her knees came down upon his thighs as water splashed out onto the floor.

Hermione reached behind Severus and turned the water off. "Dear Merlin!" she smiled. "Help me!"

Severus held her arms and steadied her, helping her lean to the back of the tub and settle herself into the water. He leaned back as best he could into the side of the tub, stretching his legs to either side of her body, making the most of their limited space.

He passed her a flannel. "Get to work, Hermione. I want to make certain you are especially clean." His smirk alerted her to what he actually hoped for.

Hermione's intuitive mind knew just what he meant. She soaped the rag, then carefully washed her face. After splashing the soap off, she resumed her ministrations in a more languid method. She reached high with one arm, and with the other hand, dragged her soapy flannel slowly from her fingers to her neck, squeezing the rag at the right moment to drip water and suds down her chest.

Severus drew a deep breath. He couldn't tear his eyes from the wet pattern glistening on her torso. As the witch continued her wanton display of cleanliness, he reached below the water's surface and grasped his now erect cock. His upward stroke brought the head above the water.

Hermione pounced.

"Let me take care of that for you, big guy."

She dropped the cloth, and with hands slick with soap, leant forward and reached for his penis.

Severus facilitated her efforts by lifting his left leg from the water, resting it upon the side of the tub. Hermione worked her grasp from tip to base, then cradled his scrotum in her hands, imprinting his weight and girth on her mind through her tactile explorations.

Severus tossed his head back and bucked forward into her grasp. "Gods, witch. Touch me again."

Hermione reached to the floor and grasped his wand, quickly transfiguring the tub to twice its size. She was pleased that the wand worked so compatibly with her magic.

Severus could now shift away from the plumbing and leaned back against the wall. Hermione crawled between his bent knees and pressed against his chest. As she nuzzled his collarbone, she turned to her side and reached for the cock that bobbed against her hip.

"Yesss," he chanted.

As she stroked him, he brought his hand to envelope her fist, guiding her motions and teaching her which touches aroused him most.

Hermione twisted so she could suckle his collarbone, rock her hip against his groin and press his cock to her belly as she worked him.

Severus reached around her, pulling her as close to him as possible. He bent his face into the curls upon her head and grunted deeply as he spilled his seed upon her belly.

The two new lovers laid languidly in the tepid bath for a minute before they stirred from their positions.

"Well, we can't say we aren't clean." Hermione smiled as she sat up and looked at the handsome, dark man sharing her space.

"No." He smiled back. "But we can remedy that situation as well if we put our minds to it."

AN: This story is being placed on a short hiatus while life takes place. Another chapter and epilogue are in the works. Many thanks to my marvelous beta, Dreamy_Dragon, and congratulations to Dreamy for being highlighted by The Petulant Poetess as part of their ten year anniversary!