

Terms and Conditions

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Chapter 1 of 1

Hermione and Severus' friendship was forged in adversity and strengthened in commonality. Will it survive when good fortune smiles on one of them?

Written for the Summer 2015 SSHG Promptfest. This time, I challenged myself to write a story from Hermione's POV and from the very start struggled with how Severus could communicate his thoughts and feelings only through the perspective of another. A special thanks to my beta, stgulik, who helped me zero in on the weak areas of this fic and gave me the help and encouragement I needed to see it through. As I polished my final draft, I realized (silly me) that Severus had very slyly let his voice be heard through a song that I'd been listening to all throughout the writing process. If you like, look up "Ten Feet Tall," by Wrabel (YouTube has a wonderful acoustic version), and you might see what I mean.

As always, everything in the Harry Potter universe belongs to JK Rowling.

Lastly, I'm giving a small nod to an (unnamed due to spoilers!) challenge category I particularly enjoyed reading when I was first introduced to the Severus/Hermione pairing.

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They ran into each other at a Muggle pub the day Hermione's divorce became final. She was in the process of getting drunk. He laughed at her; she shouted at him. Almost as a dare, he invited her out for coffee the following day. It was the inauspicious beginning of what would become an unlikely friendship.

For nearly two years, they had been meeting once or twice a week for either lunch or tea. In the beginning, there had been a tacit agreement that little, if anything, was said to the other about their current situations, as they preferred to leave their discussions to those of an intellectual nature. Hermione had worked hard to rein in her natural desire to ask questions, and so when he did begin to open up and share anything personal, she felt as if she had attained some sort of privileged status.

Coming from a Muggle background, Hermione was shocked to realize how much divorce was stigmatized in the magical world. Fed up with dealing with so-called friends and colleagues who continued to tiptoe around her, she grew to appreciate his scathing wit and frankness.

"I believe the word you were searching for is *pariah*," he commented one day after hearing that Hermione had been passed over for promotion once again. After all, he knew all about pariahs. He was Severus Snape.

~sshg~

Hermione hurriedly slid into the booth of the small eatery, words of apology for her lateness dying on her lips as she met Severus' eyes. There was an uncharacteristic undercurrent of *something* about him: subtle, yet present enough for Hermione to recognize.

"You seem a bit twitchy," she noted, opening the menu he had pushed across the narrow table. Severus snorted, his self-control snapping into place as he continued to drink his tea with practiced nonchalance. *The man could be so infuriating.* Hermione decided to bide her time. Instead of prying, she began to tell him the latest amusing anecdotes about her muddle-headed colleagues at the Ministry.

"I received an interesting post today," he finally said once their food arrived. "A solicitor has informed me that I am first in line to inherit my great-aunt's entire estate."

"Severus! That's wonderful news for you, isn't it?" Hermione knew very well what this legacy would mean to him. No longer having to scrape by on the Order of Merlin, Second Class stipend really a slap in the face when one considered his wartime sacrifices Severus would be able to give his dead end job a two-fingered farewell and do whatever he pleased. "But I didn't know you even had living relatives!"

"My mother's aunt Honoria Prince. I remember meeting her just once, when I was about five or six, I think."

"You must have done something to impress her."

Severus smirked. "Yes, I did, if you count scowling at her and bellowing that she didn't frighten me one bit. My mother scolded me all the way home."

"So it was business as usual for you even then," Hermione replied, smiling.

Severus was to appear at the solicitor's office on Friday afternoon to review some documents. "Have no fear, I plan to look them over very carefully before I sign. And," he added, rolling his eyes, "go ahead and ask. I know you want to."

Hermione's eyes crinkled in amusement. "May I take a look at them, then? Come by my flat afterwards. I'll even supply the takeaway Chinese." Severus acquiesced with a nod of his head. Hermione's field was not probate law, but she knew she could at least offer him a second set of eyes.

"Knowing what I do about Aunt Honoria, it might be a good idea. My question for you is" here Severus raised one eyebrow "are you prepared for this? My mother used to say that her aunt embodied the soul of Slytherin himself."

~sshg~

From the look of things, it had not gone well. Severus stalked in, declined her offer of tea, and slapped a roll of parchment on her table.

Hermione began to read through the legalese that comprised the three-foot long document. She was pleased to see that the estate was sizable, including a country manor in Nottinghamshire and a tidy sum of gold, valuables, and investments. To top things off, he would immediately begin to receive some of the estate's income before his aunt passed away. However, as she looked up to offer Severus some encouraging comments, Hermione was put off by the closed-off hostility emanating from him.

"Read the rest," he said with a sneer.

The rest of the document detailed the conditions that would have to be met if Severus were to claim the inheritance. Hermione read on, finally huffing loudly in disbelief.

"The horrid old bat! I understand her wanting you to change your surname to Prince, but to insist that unless you marry, the entire estate will be left to the Cornelia Bulstrode Home for Abandoned Kneazles and Crups? That's outrageous!"

Severus ground his teeth. "Obviously, I won't be accepting her terms. I've quite finished with dancing to the tune of manipulators."

"But you can't refuse this! won't let you!"

"You won't let me? Let me guess. You are going to help me procure a bride to satisfy Aunt Honoria's terms. And what will this, shall I say, *fortunate* woman feel about the two of us carrying on with our bi-weekly relationship, hmm? Any female with half a backbone would insist that her husband give up a friendship with another woman, don't you think?"

Hermione frowned. She was reluctant to say how much the attachment she had formed with her former professor meant to her. "What about a marriage of convenience? You know, find someone to fool your aunt into thinking you've agreed to her terms."

"And who would you suggest" Severus began, and then broke off suddenly, flushing as he met Hermione's eyes. "No," he said, his voice gliding into the low-pitched, dangerous tone Hermione remembered well from her school days. "I cannot allow you to do that."

"Do what? We can carry on with our lives just as we've been doing. Separate residences, meeting up for coffee, lunch, or whatever else. All that would change would be a piece of paper filed at the Ministry."

"How about ruining your life?"

"No more so than it's already been ruined."

Severus scowled. "Despite everyone's opinion, I actually do have a conscience, and I cannot justify trapping you in yet another marriage, no matter what benefits I would receive from it. I'd never expect you to make that kind of sacrifice."

They each glared ferociously, then continued to argue for close to an hour until Severus finally threw up his hands in defeat.

"The only thing worse than Gryffindors is Gryffindors who also happen to be solicitors. Just don't make me say 'I told you so' when the press gets wind of this and makes your life a living hell."

"Don't sulk, Severus. It doesn't become you," Hermione said with a smug little smile.

"Neither does gloating become you."

The main item being resolved, they were able to discuss the rest of the particulars in a civilized manner over dinner. A charm upon the dishes had kept everything deliciously warm. The garlic shrimp and chicken fried rice were superb, and their conversation, once they had cleared the marriage hurdle, was stimulating as always.

~sshg~

Hermione spent Saturday giving her flat a perfunctory cleaning and trying to catch up on some paperwork, all the while thinking about her impending nuptials. It was turning out to be a horrid day. Distracted by thoughts of the weekend ahead, even the pleasant routine of her work could not calm the uneasy thoughts.

During their dispute the night before, Severus had sneered and reminded her of the many causes she had thrown herself into, starting with her time at Hogwarts and continuing over the years. He was not going to be another one of them, thank you very much. It had taken a while, but she had finally convinced Severus that her feelings of admiration and respect were the only reason why she was willing to marry him.

So why was she second-guessing herself now? Would this ruin the friendship they had enjoyed for the past two years?

And then there was that other matter. Hermione recalled the slightly pained look on Severus' face as he revealed the condition that had been built into the marriage requirement: the union would need to be consummated within forty-eight hours of the papers being filed. "Aunt Honoria makes sure not to miss a trick," he had stated

grimly. He went on to reassure Hermione that he understood that her feelings of friendship could probably impede her desiring him in *that way*, and offered to brew a lust potion for them both to use on the wedding night.

*What if I can't go through with it?*

*What if he is so turned off by my looks that he refuses to?*

*Or worse yet, what if he takes his money and leaves?*

~sshg~

They got married the following Friday. Hermione's job made it necessary to hold just a brief afternoon ceremony at the Ministry, after which she returned to her office to complete her workday. Severus, whose hours were more flexible, had already left to prepare for their weekend together. Aunt Honoria had offered the use of her guesthouse, and he had convinced Hermione that it would be a gesture of good faith on their part to accept.

Hermione was not at all ready to begin the evening. Tonight she would be taking a lust potion and having sex with her friend and, she reminded herself for what seemed like the hundredth time, her former professor. When at last she could not put it off any longer, Hermione activated the Portkey her husband had provided and was swept off and away.

It did not matter that the cottage was tastefully decorated, with every aspect designed to appeal to the senses. Hermione's nerves were wound tight, and she was desperate to get out of her work clothes. Severus, she saw, had made an effort and looked dignified yet comfortable in black slacks and hunter green button-down.

"Are you hungry?" he asked politely. "My great-aunt's house elf will be bringing our dinner whenever we are ready."

"I'd like a chance to bathe and change first." Severus nodded and went back to the book he had been engrossed in.

Feeling more relaxed after her abbreviated soak, Hermione put on the dress she had thankfully had the good sense to pack. It was made of a soft material that was simple, yet stylish. She knew she'd made the right choice once she rejoined Severus and met his appreciative gaze.

"We clean up very nicely," Hermione observed. "I've always liked you in that color."

"You, on the other hand, could use something to complement your dress. Aunt Honoria wanted you to have this." Severus' face was inscrutable as he opened a velvet box. "Shall I?" he asked, undoing the clasp of an old-fashioned necklace with expert fingers.

It was his touch that undid her. Severus' hands were warm, his fingers caressing the smooth skin of her neck just a few seconds more than were necessary after the chain was fastened.

"This is lovely," said Hermione, hoping that Severus would not notice the slightly tremulous sound of her voice. "I will be sure to send your aunt an owl to thank her."

"But not at this very moment. It is late, and we shouldn't keep dinner waiting."

As if on command, a house elf appeared. Hermione took Severus' proffered arm, and they proceeded into the dining area. A beautiful, candlelit little table was set with the finest antique china, with two ornate Louis XIV chairs placed cozily side by side.

They began with a champagne toast, followed by a delicious dinner and even more champagne. As the dessert course was produced, a large slice of decadent chocolate layer cake, Hermione groaned, holding her stomach. "I really couldn't eat one more bite."

"Indulge me, Hermione," Severus said, taking one of the forks and scooping up some of the cake. "I requested this specifically, knowing your weakness for chocolate."

"No, Severus," Hermione protested weakly. It was the slightest turn of her head, just at the moment when the fork arrived at its destination that left her with a small mouthful of cake and a cheek covered in chocolate.

*Oh no! This has to be just like that distasteful American custom where the bride and groom smash cake all over each other's faces*, she thought, but Severus, always the observant ex-spy, had taken his long index finger and rubbed off some of the frosting.

"Mmm," he said, closing his eyes and slowly licking every bit off his finger.

"Severus Snape, are you drunk?" Hermione asked. He raised his eyebrow at her and smirked.

"I most certainly am not," he replied. "I'm simply enjoying this delightful cake. You're not the only one with a fondness for chocolate."

*Two can play at that game, and this bride is also going to take her turn*Smiling sweetly at her bridegroom, Hermione began to fork up a large piece of cake, only to have him wandlessly summon it away from her. Once again, he dabbed his finger at some of the rich chocolate frosting on her cheek and licked it away.

"Greedy! Selfish! How do you know I wasn't going to eat that myself?"

"Because I know you, Miss Granger," Severus said in his low, silky voice. Hermione had long ago discovered that he sometimes used her schoolroom name as an affectionate way to get a rise out of her. "And you should know that yes, I am very greedy."

"Are you?" Hermione asked, a bit unsteadily. Some chocolate remained on her lips, and his eyes widened as she carefully licked them.

There was a beat of silence, and their eyes locked. Simultaneously, they came together, leaning over to devour each other's lipslicking, nibbling, kissing, and sucking until they were both breathless.

"Mmmm, delicious," Severus groaned, and dove in for another taste. Part of Hermione's brain was clamoring to remember something what was it? *Lust Potion* finally forced itself forward, but by that time she was too distracted by Severus' hands snaking up her thighs to gasp anything but "don't stop!"

They somehow made it to the bedroom where hands and mouths continued their frantic exploration. Severus had long since traded his *mmm, delicious* for the many variations of the word *beautiful*, until their capacity for speech gave way to moans of pleasure and cries of completion.

~sshg~

Hermione opened her eyes, quickly accessing the unfamiliar surroundings in the pre-dawn light. So, it hadn't merely been a dream. Severus lay propped up on his elbow, watching her.

"Severus?" she asked and was treated to one of his rare smiles. "Did you really mean the things you said last night?" Hermione sat up, blushing as she pulled the sheet up over her breasts. "You called me beautiful."

"I called you beautiful because you are. I have wished to tell you this for a long time," he admitted.

"You insufferable man! Why did you tell me that you didn't want to marry me then?" Hermione demanded.

"I fear you've grown sloppy in your estimations, my dear. I only gave reasons why you shouldn't marry me; I never said once that I didn't want to marry *you*."

Hermione took a moment to process his last statement. Could it be that he'd been hiding his feelings for her all along?

"Well, husband, after last night, I think this 'marriage of convenience' may have to be renegotiated."

"It would seem so, wife," Severus answered, drawing her close. "Aunt Honoria probably never even realized that her meddling could turn out so well for both of us."

"Do you think we should send her an owl?" Hermione teased.

"Of course, but not at this very moment. I'd like to take some time this morning to be certain that all her terms and conditions have been met."

### **Not Quite an Epilogue**

The house elf Tully Apparated into the guest cottage with the softest 'crack' that he could manage. Almost slavishly devoted to his Missy Honoria, Tully did not even think to question her command to check in on the bridal couple so early in the morning.

As it was, the elf could have entered with a clash of cymbals and not been noticed. With a slight olive green flush staining his face, Tully hurriedly left to rejoin his mistress.

Honoria Prince was an early riser and had a morning routine that had been the same for the last fifty-five years. She took breakfast in a small, eastward facing room that, in the proper seasons, was lit up and warmed by the morning sun. On this particular morning, the eagerness to hear her house elf's report surpassed Miss Prince's desire to stay on schedule.

"Well?" she asked as Tully entered with a brief bow.

"They is both in the bedroom, Missy Honoria, and they is being *very noisy*."

"Thank you, Tully. I believe I shall have an egg with my tea and toast this morning."

Tully had been given to Honoria Prince when she was ten years old and consequently was so attuned to the slightest nuances of her demeanor that anyone else would have missed the elderly woman's wrinkled mouth turning up in the briefest of smiles.

What he did miss, however, were his mistress' gleeful cackles of laughter once he'd left to prepare breakfast.

Mischief Managed