

Pushing the Envelope

by Britt1975

Severus Snape is about to be given his liberty from the Ministry's pilot rehabilitations program and his Probational Monitor, Hermione Granger. Five years is a long time to spend under the thumb of an annoyingly know-it-all Gryffindor, but is it long enough for him to see her as more than that? Will accusations of impropriety doom their chance for happiness?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

Severus Snape is about to be given his liberty from the Ministry's pilot rehabilitations program and his Probational Monitor, Hermione Granger. Five years is a long time to spend under the thumb of an annoyingly know-it-all Gryffindor, but is it long enough for him to see her as more than that? Will accusations of impropriety doom their chance for happiness?

Author's notes: This was written for the **Summer 2007** SSHG_exchange on Livejournal. My prompt was from Benebu who asked for: *The newspapers start writing about the romance between Severus and Hermione, quoting a 'reliable source.' The thing is there's no romance. How do they react? Will they ignore it, laugh together about the improbability of it all? Or maybe it will give them ideas... Oh, and btw, who tipped off the press?*

"I'm sorry I'm late," Hermione gasped as she bustled up to his small table in the crowded cafe, smiling apologetically at an elderly lady who was jostled by Hermione's overstuffed shoulder bag. "I was caught up by this article in *Alchemy and Arithmancy*," she waved the periodical at him as she dropped into a chair, dumping her bag in another, "and I missed the announcement for my tube stop, and then I realized I was already two stops past Knightsbridge and I had to get off and backtrack." Hermione abruptly stopped mid-sentence and snatched up his teacup, taking several long sips before blowing her hair off her face and pushing it behind her ears. "Have you read it?"

Severus watched the whirlwind that was Hermione Granger with a sort of detached amusement. Six years as her professor and five more as her *charge* he supposed had taught him it was simply easiest to let her run out of steam before trying to speak.

"Have I read what, Miss Granger?"

"Hermione." She waved the periodical at him again. "The article on the application of Arithmancy to the preparation of the Draught of Peace, increasing its effectiveness."

"No," he said simply, scowling at her when she reached for his tea again. "I'm quite sure that this establishment has more than one teacup, and I will be happy to procure one for you as soon as I can gain the attention of a wait-person."

"I'm fine sharing yours, though it needs a bit more sugar."

"But I am not fine with that, Miss Granger. I prefer to keep my tea to myself and it's perfectly sweetened, thank you very much!" Severus narrowed his eyes, but his voice had taken on the playful tone that she never heard him use with anyone but her.

"Hermione." She snickered and scanned the crowd of Muggles, looking for a waiter. Spotting a young man in the ubiquitous white shirt, black pants and apron the wait-staff

in this trendy Knightsbridge café wore, she summoned him. After giving the waiter her order, she turned back to Severus. "Why must we do this each time? Why won't you just call me Hermione? You know you'll give in eventually, you always do."

Severus met her gaze over the top of the teacup, which he refused to return to the table until hers arrived. "Because it annoys you so very much, *Miss Granger*. I get a certain measure of delight in the way your nose wrinkles up and your eyes flash each time you correct me in that exasperated tone of voice."

"Well as we are celebrating the end these *forced meetings* could you please skip the little games and be so kind as to address me as I have asked without making me repeat myself half a dozen times?"

"Very well, Hermione." He drew her name out, clearly enunciating each syllable. "Then I suppose you should call me Severus." He paused a moment before curling his lip in what might be considered a smile. "Oh, that's right!" he exclaimed with false enthusiasm. "You already do!"

Unfortunately, Hermione had just taken the first sip from her own tea. She found that his comment combined with the jarring expression of false enthusiasm on his face made it difficult to keep from spraying him with her drink. "Severus!" Hermione exclaimed after swallowing. "Did you just make a jest?"

He curled his lip again and inclined his head in her direction. "It appears that my looming freedom has put me in a rather good humor."

Hermione smiled brightly at him before reaching into her giant shoulder bag. "I have something for you." She sifted through the contents, mumbling as she pulled out items to clear her way. Several books, an empty crisps bag, a sock, a folded sheet of parchment, and the mobile phone she carried to keep in touch with her parents found their way onto the table.

Severus eyed the bulky bag with distaste. "Hermione, you are no longer a student. Is the ghastly knapsack necessary?"

She clutched the bag to her chest as though he might snatch it away from her. "I'm a woman, Severus. These are the things I need."

He picked up the empty crisps bag and raised an eyebrow at her.

She shrugged and bit her lip, laughter in her eyes. "I *needed* them on the tube when I got hungry."

Severus didn't bother holding back his laughter as he admitted to himself that he was going to miss her sense of humour.

"Aha!" Hermione smiled smugly as she finally found what she'd been searching for. "I thought you might be interested in this."

He sneered at what was clearly a copy of the *Daily Prophet* in her hand. "I'm quite sure that I'm not interested in anything printed in that rag."

She leaned forward and tapped a bolded square on the bottom corner of the page she'd folded open. "I think this might change your mind."

He sighed and took the paper from her, pulling it close to his face and squinting at the section she had indicated.

"For Merlin's sake!" Exasperated, Hermione reached into the front pocket of his shirt and removed his glasses, shoving them into his hand. "Put the damn things on, Severus."

He glared at her for a moment, forgetting that it no longer had any effect on her, before thrusting the glasses onto his nose with poor grace. "It's not my eyesight, *Miss Granger*. The print has simply blurred from too much handling."

"Yes, of course, that must be it."

Severus didn't need to lower the paper to know she was currently rolling her eyes at him. It was her favorite way to demonstrate that he no longer intimidated her in the least.

He quickly scanned the small advertisement.

"Innovative Potions Expert needed to steer an emerging company interested in research and development of alternative potions. Must be willing to take a hand in guiding the company, think creatively and work with little or no supervision. Interested parties should owl their CV to Aliank Hybrid Ltd."

He raised his head to see Hermione's eyes glittering with excitement. For a moment, he wanted to let himself believe in the future he knew she was imagining. He wanted to believe that he wouldn't be spending the rest of his life in the bowels of the Ministry; that he would once again be allowed to do something with potions ingredients other than sort and catalogue them. He wanted to believe that he and Hermione would be able to form a relationship which didn't involve someone being in charge, but he was a realist. He knew that none of those things were in his future.

Although he'd officially been pardoned, he knew he would forever be labeled as a Death Eater, and worse, as the murderer of Albus Dumbledore. No reputable company, even an *emerging* one, would be interested in taking him on, regardless of his expertise in potions. He knew that Hermione's high profile job as a liaison between the Departments of International Magical Cooperation and Muggle Affairs meant she must always be above reproach and could never be seen socially with him. The meetings required by his sentence had provided opportunities for them to spend time together without raising questions, but the completion of the program meant that, in all likelihood, this truly would be the last time he and Hermione ever spent more than a few passing moments in one another's company. He refused to spend it thinking about all the things that he couldn't have.

He deliberately flipped the paper over and laid it on the table. "Hermione, I know you think ..." His voice trailed off as something caught his eye. Hermione glanced down at the paper to see what had drawn his attention and she cringed.

"Severus, you know better than to read anything they like to masquerade as news." She put her hand out to retrieve the paper and gasped when he caught her wrist in a vise-like grip.

"Were you going to show me this?"

His tone had gone glacial, and she was forcibly reminded of a time when he had wielded his voice like a sword. She pushed the thought out of her head and forced a laugh.

"No, of course I wasn't. Why should I? It's nothing but rubbish, standard for the *Prophet*."

"Because this bit of rubbish is going to cause problems," Severus snapped.

"It's just an editorial!" Hermione tried to seize the paper again, but Severus pulled it out of her reach.

"Hermione, I assure you that this *editorial* is going to have at least one of us standing before the Wizengamot before the end of the week."

"Nonsense!" She leaned forward and snatched the paper back. "No one gives any notice to the editorials."

Probational Monitoring or Dating Service?

Five years ago after the defeat of the wizard formerly known as 'He Who Must Not Be Named' Probational Monitoring was put into effect for those of his followers who were proven to have been operating under the Imperius Curse or acting in some other manner which coerced their cooperation.

Sympathetic to these witches and wizards, the Wizengamot, nonetheless, could not simply allow them to go free. Probational Monitoring was the answer. This system allowed an outstanding member of the Wizarding Community to act as a mentor to the accused, and we, the citizens of wizarding Britain, breathed a sigh of relief, secure in the knowledge that these people were being assisted by such exceptional leaders of our community. I applaud the Wizengamot for creating such a forward-thinking system.

However, I am shocked to discover that one of the accused was paired with someone less than concerned with the safety and security of the citizens of Wizarding Britain. It has come to my attention that, in this case, the Monitor assigned was the paramour of the accused.

This Monitor was a staunch defender of the accused during his trial, offering pivotal testimony designed to ensure that the former Death Eater would not face time in Azkaban. The young woman was also a primary proponent of the Probational Monitoring system. In light of recent discoveries, I'm certain there was a motive to her machinations.

This young woman is known for her taste in celebrity wizards as has been reported in this very newspaper in the past and it appears the Wizengamot has unknowingly furthered her quest to add yet another wizard to her cadre.

The couple has been spotted on social outings in a variety of places, none of which fit the parameters of the Probational Monitoring program. In addition, Floo records, which have been made available to this citizen, prove that the couple spends a great deal of time in each other's homes, not to mention that they talk on a daily basis.

I must ask, are these the actions of an honest public servant? Or are they the actions of a woman who has manipulated the Wizengamot for her own selfish ends?

How can we citizens be expected to believe that the Monitor acted in the best interests of the community? Surely the Wizengamot would not have chosen her had they known that her mentoring would be conducted in the bedroom?

We, the citizens of wizarding Britain, demand accountability! The Wizengamot must take a closer look at the Probational Monitoring participants, paying especially close attention to those whose sentences are soon to be ending. I am sure that they will be dismayed with what they find.

Signed,

A Concerned Citizen

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

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Hermione was aware that there were spells to take care of the washing up, but she rarely used them. She supposed it was due to her Muggle upbringing that she found something soothing in the repetitive splash and rinse motion of washing the dishes. Some of her most successful campaigns had been planned while she stood over a sink of soapy water, staring out at the view from her kitchen window. Currently, her view was blocked by a large tawny owl, and she hurriedly dried her hands to take the envelope being offered on its outstretched leg.

She had spent the last several days poring over the *Daily Prophet*, and she knew as soon as she spotted the spiky handwriting on the envelope, that the letter was going to be one giant "told you so." Though, of course, Severus would never be so Gryffindorishly blunt.

Hermione-

I wonder if you have noticed that the Daily

Prophet has recently seen fit to expand their

editorial section by a number of pages.

Unsurprisingly, each of those pages seems entirely

devoted to our torrid affair. I was surprised to

see that I have a few defenders who have seen fit

to dub me as kind, solicitous, and romantic when

I'm in your company. You, however, appear to

have been almost universally branded as a harlot

who used the Wizengamot to force me into your

bed.

He raised an eyebrow and gave a slight shake to his head at her reaction. "It appears that the job was a condition of my Monitoring, and now that it's over, they are no

longer *forced* to continue my employment."

Hermione slammed her glass down on the small table next to her chair before rising to her feet to pace the length of the room. "That's unconscionable of them!" She stopped in front of his chair and dropped into a crouch, placing her hand on his knee. "You were too good for that position anyway, Severus. Have you given any more thought to the advertisement I showed you?"

"I appreciate your faith in me, Hermione, but you know that no hope lies down that path."

"I know nothing of the sort! You would be perfect for the position! Even if the Ministry had been willing to promote you to a position more indicative of your abilities, they're too backward and stuffy for the kind of innovative work that you're capable of!"

He shook his head and gave a rueful chuckle. "It's alarming, this fervent loyalty you have to your employers." He took her hand from his knee and rose to his feet, pulling her to stand in front of him. "But, at this moment it's the *Wizengamot* summons that concerns me. I'm certain they will not simply take our word that the rubbish in the *Prophet* is, in fact, rubbish."

Hermione waved a hand negligently in the air. "Why on earth are you so concerned about the *Wizengamot*, Severus? They're going to give you a dose of Veritaserum and then it's going to go something like this." She cleared her throat and began speaking with a dramatically deepened voice that he knew mimicked the current Head of the *Wizengamot*. "Severus Snape, are you aware of the recent surge of editorials in the *Daily Prophet* regarding improper relations in pairings of the Probational Monitoring Program."

Severus smirked and watched as she resumed pacing, hands behind her back and eyes heavenward as though seeking the wisdom of the gods. "Yes," he drawled, amused by her theatrics.

Hermione dropped the act for a moment. "Good. You never want to give them more than they ask for, keep your answers simple and direct."

"I have spoken before the *Wizengamot* a time or two, Hermione; I think I might remember how it works." His mouth twisted a little as he tried to avoid smiling at the blush rising in her cheeks.

"Yes, well." She cleared her throat again and resumed her performance. "Then you understand, Mr. Snape, why it is that you are here?"

"Yes." He inclined his head as she broke character once more to smile winningly at him.

"Will you please explain the nature of your relationship with your Monitor, Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Certainly." Severus crossed his arms over his chest, one hand coming up to tap a long forefinger on his chin. His eyes took on a faraway expression as he stared pensively into the air. "Miss Granger was my student for six years at Hogwarts, where she drove me quite mad in her quest to prove that she knew everything."

Hermione put her hands on her hips, stomped her foot and made a noise of dissent.

He cut his eyes toward her and was almost done in by her furious pout. "If I may continue, your honor?"

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, glaring at him for a moment before nodding curtly for him to carry on.

"Five years ago against the advice of her friends, I'm sure she volunteered to be my Probational Monitor. We were to meet twice a week for a period of one hour and discuss any concerns I had and ways in which I could once again become a productive member of wizarding society." He didn't try to stop the sarcasm dripping from his last few words.

"Did you adhere to the mandates of the program, Mr. Snape?"

"I did."

"Mr. Snape, I do not mean to be indecorous, but at any time while Miss Granger was your Probational Monitor, did you engage in an improper relationship with her?"

"I did not."

"There!" Hermione threw up her hands. "That will be the end of it."

"Assuming that I will submit to questioning under Veritaserum, which I won't do unless they agree to limit their questions to the matter at hand."

"You will, and they will. There will be someone there to guarantee that they do."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her in question.

"I made a call before I came over. Luna has agreed to act as counsel for you tomorrow, and she won't allow them to ask you anything outside the parameters of their investigation."

"Luna?" He searched his mind for a moment before his eyes widened in comprehension. "Luna Lovegood from Ravenclaw; the rather daft one everyone called *Loony* Lovegood?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him again. "It's Luna Longbottom now, and I'd think it would be in your best interest not to call your counsel, *Loony*."

"Is there no end to your meddling in my life?"

Pursing her lips and squinting in contemplation, she waited a beat. "No."

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

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As Severus navigated the Ministry's labyrinth of hallways, he pondered that while Hermione had been mistaken about the outcome of that vexing piece of trash in the *Prophet*, she had been exactly on target about the Wizengamot summons. In addition to the fact that he and Hermione were innocent of any wrongdoing, the Wizengamot certainly hadn't wanted any smears on what had become their pet project. Therefore, the questions had been succinct and perfunctory, seeking only the bare minimum to determine the truth. He had then been presented with papers declaring that he had officially completed the Probational Monitoring Program.

He patted the inner pocket where the papers rested. He was once again a fully functioning member of wizarding society with all of the rights and responsibilities thereto.

Severus scowled as he thought of what little good it would do him. He paused as he came to a cross-hallway, looking both ways before proceeding to the left in the direction that he thought would carry him to Hermione's office. Although he had been invited to her office on a number of occasions, Severus had always demurred. Beyond his desire to avoid most of the wizarding populace, he knew that visiting Hermione would provide grist for the always active Ministry gossip mill. So far, other than the usual flurry of inter-office mail, he'd been lucky enough not to encounter anyone, and he hoped the trend would continue. He often thought the only two benefits of his job in the bowels of the Ministry were the little-used Floo entrance located near the Potions Department installed due to the occasional need to Floo to St. Mungo's without delay and the solitude. Judicious use of the former and a devout appreciation for the latter meant that even though he worked in the Ministry of Magic, Severus had been able to avoid most members of the wizarding world for the last five years, and he had little desire to stumble upon any of them today.

He checked his stride, approaching what he determined to be the last turn before Hermione's office, and a ghost of a smile tugged at his lips as the sound of her voice floated down the hall, confirming his skills of navigation.

Unfortunately, he realized, a moment too late, that hearing her voice probably indicated that she was talking to someone. Severus averted his head as a young man exited Hermione's open door, calling back that he hoped that she would call him soon. Severus was preoccupied by the frisson of jealousy that skittered down his spine and barely noticed when the young man nodded and greeted him as "Professor Snape."

Severus whipped his head around, and had anyone been watching they would have laughed at the dumbfounded expression on his face.

"Was that Neville Longbottom?" he demanded as he strode through the open door, accompanied by a memo that winged past him into a tray clearly marked 'IN.'

"Hello to you too. I'm doing fine, thank you for asking. Would you like a seat? Some tea?" Hermione asked with a wry smile, his sudden entrance catching her off guard. "I'm surprised to see you. I know how you feel about visiting me here." She waved him toward a small seating area before drawing her wand to close and ward the door for privacy.

He hesitated; perhaps he shouldn't have come. "I just wanted to tell you that you were right about the Wizengamot proceedings." He made a move toward the door, reaching for the handle just as Hermione settled herself in a wingback chair, charmingly covered in a toile pattern. "I can Floo you about it later. It's probably not a good idea for me to be here."

Hermione looked up at him, exasperated. "For Merlin's sake, Severus! Sit down! There's no reason at all that you shouldn't be here. I'd very much like to hear how it went with the Wizengamot, and, yes, that was Neville Longbottom." With another swish of her wand, Hermione Summoned a tea tray for the two of them.

Severus nodded and took the chair next to her, looking around her very Hermione-ish office. Like all rooms Hermione occupied, this one was dominated by bookshelves. There was a little space carved out on one wall for the necessary fireplace and on another for a charmed window, currently showing a rather unseasonable snow. She had a small desk in the corner, but he imagined she conducted most of her meetings in the area they were currently occupying. The two wingback chairs, a low table where the tea tray had just appeared, and a small couch had been placed in front of the fire to create an illusion of homey comfort. He was quite sure it was the perfect place for Hermione to lull unsuspecting Ministry employees into a false sense of security before she metaphorically pounced on them.

Hermione interrupted his perusal of her office to hand him a cup of tea. "So you were going to tell me that I was completely right and you were sorry for ever doubting me," she teased him affectionately, recalling their conversation of the night before when she had readily admitted to having been wrong.

Severus bared his teeth in a facsimile of a smile. "Yes, that's exactly what I was going to say! Also, I've decided to throw off the mantle of civility and will be immediately relocating to the wilds of Canada to raise Billywigs."

"Don't be silly." Another memo had slipped into her office and was bobbing around her head. Impatiently, she waved it toward the inbox while wrinkling her nose at him. "Billywigs are native to Australia and would not be at all suited to Canada's climate."

"Ah, well, I guess I shall simply have to remain here then." Severus idly stirred his tea. "Though since Billywig raising is out, I will have to begin searching for other avenues of employment. The Wizengamot presented me with my papers. I'm now officially a free man again." He set down his cup and rose, crossing to the window to study the snow. "Rather unusual weather for June."

Hermione hummed in agreement. "Magical Maintenance has been working on personalizing the charms so the view will be attuned to the occupant of the office. I guess I feel like snow today."

He looked over his shoulder at her, one eyebrow raised in question, but Hermione merely shrugged. He turned back to the window for a moment before moving on to study the books crowding her shelves. "I like your office, Hermione, it suits you. I'd like to find something that suits me as well."

Hermione shifted restlessly before abandoning her chair to join him. "Severus, I know you think it's folly, but I think no! I'm sure you should consider the advertisement we discussed. You are exactly what they're looking for, and I know you would be happy there."

Severus turned to her and reached out, fingers ghosting down the length of her arm, brushing against her fingertips before dropping his hand to his side. "You will never understand how much your regard means to me, but my past will define me for the rest of my life, and I cannot spend time wishing for things that will never be mine."

"What do you spend your time wishing for?" she whispered, her body shifting forward imperceptibly.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head, resting his forehead against hers for the briefest of moments. "No, Hermione." Shifting past her to the fireplace, he gripped the mantelpiece with one hand and drew in a deep breath to slow his rapid heartbeat. "Thoughts like that will lead to madness. I will not injure you that way. Speculation about us is already rampant."

Hermione turned to watch him silhouetted by the glow of the crackling fire. "I don't object to the speculation. Last night we made light of my loyalty to the Ministry, but I am loyal, Severus. Only it's not to the Ministry. It's to you."

"As I am to you, which is why I will not be party to your disgrace. I will not be responsible for ousting you from a job that you love. My position was insignificant, and I can find any number of things to replace what I had. For that matter, I can easily find the same kind of menial employment in the Muggle world and never be forced to deal with the sneers and snubs again." He gave his head a small shake. "You do not have the same luxury. Any relationship with me would most likely mean the end of your employment with the Ministry."

"Severus, the job isn't what's important to me; you are! I don't love my job!" Hermione fisted her hands in frustration. "Maybe I did at one point, but even then it was still *just* a job. Which is why, for awhile now, I've been looking for a chance to move in another direction. I'm no longer happy with the position the Ministry has put me in, either professionally or personally. I was actually planning to talk to you about this tonight. Recent developments have given me hope that something better suited to my interests

will be available soon."

"Recent developments?" Severus prompted, turning to her with what looked like a flicker of hope in his eyes. "You haven't mentioned that you were considering leaving the Ministry."

"Yes, well," she smiled ruefully, "when I said recent, I was being quite literal. This afternoon I was returning from a planning meeting with the Deputy Minister of Finance, the Deputy Director of Gringotts, and the Deputy Minister of Muggle Relations. You've heard, of course, about the decline in the value of Muggle currency relating to the exchange rate against foreign currency?"

Smiling, he gestured for her to continue. Knowing Hermione as he did, he knew that she was warming to her subject and needed little encouragement to launch into further explanations.

"The Goblins are in an uproar over the situation, and they all the Ministry and Gringotts and the Muggle liaison seem to expect me to put a good face on the whole mess. When I started here, my purpose was to foster mutual respect between the Muggle and wizarding worlds. Lately though, I've become the Ministry's *Spin Doctor*, trying to make their position more palatable to the average witch and wizard. As I returned to my office, I was thinking about how tired I am of wading through the incomprehensible yarn-ball of Ministry politics."

"At that moment, I happened to run into Neville, who was just leaving the Registrations and Licenses office. It seems his company has recently changed focus and has begun to expand. He was securing the appropriate license for the new arm of his company."

"I didn't realize Mr. Longbottom had gone into business." Severus was surprised. If he had considered Neville Longbottom's future, owning a business would never have made the list of possible occupations. Severus rather thought he would have ended up buried in a greenhouse somewhere. "How does that affect the change in direction you mentioned?"

Hermione's eyes glittered with excitement. "Neville has never been interested in the minutiae of running the business, and with the company's recent growth, he's spending far more time in an office than he would like. He's looking for someone who can handle the day-to-day decisions so he can focus on development and production. He wants someone who works well with people and has experience in dealing with the international community. He thinks he'll eventually want to expand worldwide. I told him I'd think about it."

"Then it sounds like something that would be remarkably well-suited to you." Severus reached over and squeezed her hand. "It sounds like Mr. Longbottom has given you a great deal to think about."

"He has, but there are *some* things I don't need to think about." Hermione turned her hand over so that she could thread her fingers through his. "Severus, will you do me a favor?"

"If it is within my power."

"Think about the position in the advertisement, and while you're at it, consider that you are not the outcast in the wizarding world that you like to think yourself. You were pardoned. Yes, the Wizengamot made an example of you by using you as the first participant in the Probational Monitoring Program. And, yes, there are some narrow-minded fools who will never accept that you did what you had to do in the face of war. But for most people, it's not an issue any longer. You've punished yourself with a self-imposed exile for the last five years, hiding away in the Muggle world, convinced that you were no longer welcome in ours, but that's simply not true."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand to stop him.

"When was the last time you ventured into the wizarding world, Severus? And I'm not talking about work, where you bury yourself in the storage room of the Potions Guild. When was the last time you encountered the sneers and snubs that you're so afraid of?"

Severus pulled away from her and rubbed his hands over his face. "I will admit that it's been over four years since I ventured beyond the Ministry, but the experience was one I would rather not relive. And my recent perusals of the *Prophet* haven't given me cause to think things would be different now."

"Please tell me you aren't using the *Daily Prophet* as a barometer for the feelings of the wizarding world." Hermione snorted. "Besides, you, yourself, said there were several letters praising you for your chivalrous attitude towards me, though where and how they saw us, in light of our avoidance of all things wizarding, I can't imagine." Hermione placed a hand on his arm and smiled at him. "I can't promise that you won't occasionally encounter ignorant fools, but I'm positive that they make up the minority." She paused as they watched another piece of mail flutter to rest in her inbox, the volume of which had grown to resemble a small mountain.

"You deserve the chance to be happy, Severus. Are you willing to reach out and take it?"

Severus searched her eyes, stunned by the truth he saw there, that a future with her was possible. He took her hand and brought it to his lips. "I am."

He pointed at her inbox and stood, still holding her hand. "I know that you have work to do, and there are things that I would like to say to you without interruption. Will you Floo over this evening? I would like you to join me for dinner, and perhaps when we are through, you could help me update my CV?"

Hermione smiled brilliantly and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "I would love to join you this evening." They walked to the door hand-in-hand, and then she rose to her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "What time would you like me to arrive?"

"How soon can you be done here?" he asked, his eyes lingering on her lips.

Hermione's pulse raced in anticipation, but as she spared a glance at her towering stack of mail, she winced. "How does seven o'clock work for you?"

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

Severus Snape is about to be given his liberty from the Ministry's pilot rehabilitations program and his Probational Monitor, Hermione Granger. Five years is a long time to spend under the thumb of an annoyingly know-it-all Gryffindor, but is it long enough for him to see her as more than that? Will accusations of impropriety doom their chance for happiness?

Severus was just finishing dinner preparations when he heard the Floo activate. Slipping his wand into his sleeve, he stepped into the living room to see Hermione standing stiffly in front of his fireplace. As she had been fine when he'd left her several hours before, he was shocked to see her face blotchy and red, her hands covered in thick bandages, and she was holding a large box.

"Hermione, what on earth happened to you?" He hurried to her and took the box from her, setting it on the floor before lifting her hands to examine the wrappings.

She took a shuddering breath and offered him a tremulous smile. "Remember that new direction I was talking about today? Well, it appears I'll be moving in it sooner rather than later. I've quit my job, Severus."

He glanced into the box; it was full of miniaturized books, the same books which had graced the shelves of her office that afternoon.

"Somehow I doubt you did *that* by packing your books." Severus gestured to her hands. "So why don't you come sit down in the kitchen. You can tell me what happened while I finish dinner."

All the tension seemed to flow out of Hermione as he led her back to the welcoming kitchen. Severus pulled a chair away from his scrubbed oak farm table and waited while she settled into it. "I was going to serve a nice Riesling with the chicken. Would you like me to pour you a glass, or would you like something stronger?"

"The wine would be lovely. Thank you, Severus." Hermione crossed her arms on the tabletop and laid her head down for a moment.

Severus brought the wine to her and lightly ran his hand down the length of her hair. "Would you like to tell me about it?"

She heaved a sigh and lifted her head. "I'm not sure there's much to tell." She reached for her wineglass with both hands and took a deep draught from it. "After you left, I sorted through my inbox. There were several pieces of personal correspondence, but I set them aside to deal with later. Most of what you saw was paperwork relating to the rather urgent issue I mentioned earlier, and I knew that it needed to be completed today."

Hermione took another sip of her wine, but the bandages made her hands clumsy, and she fumbled the glass. Her eyes filled with tears of frustration as Severus drew his wand and quickly dealt with the mess. Summoning the bottle, he poured her some more.

Her downtrodden expression made him ache to hold her, but he knew that her need to talk was more urgent than his need to comfort her. He compromised by gently brushing her hair back from her face, smiling when she leaned into the caress and sighed a little before continuing.

"Dealing with that took most of the afternoon, and I was actually tidying up my office when I remembered the rest of the mail. There was a note from Ron the Department of Magical Games and Sports sent him to Bulgaria to get a head start on planning the next World Cup he wanted to tell me he ran into Viktor while he was there. Then I got a sheet of material swatches from Ginny. She's trying to decide on the color of the bridesmaid dresses and wanted my opinion." Hermione laughed lightly. "I swear she and Harry can't get married quickly enough for me. I've had to give my opinion on everything from music to cakes to personalized vows. Obviously, since she's got time to do wedding planning at work, they need more to do down in the Office of Experimental Charms."

Waving her hands in the air, she continued. "These are courtesy of the last thing I opened. An envelope full of Bubotuber pus and a letter full of insane ranting."

Severus fought back the urge to hit something; instead, he drew his wand and pointed toward a cabinet above the sink. "*Accio Murtlap Essence!*" He turned toward another cabinet and Summoned a large bowl. "I keep Murtlap Essence on hand in case of kitchen accidents. I brew it with a tisane; it speeds the natural healing properties of the Murtlap and increases the analgesic effect."

His voice was clipped, though not unkind, but Hermione knew he was angry. "This is not your fault, Severus." She watched as he poured the yellow liquid into the bowl. "The letter made it clear I am their target, and it said the editorial was just the beginning. They wrote that I make a habit of ruining people's lives and as a *Death Eater Whore* I should be punished. Apparently they're infuriated at the Wizengamot's lack of action against me; and they've decided it was up to someone else to teach me a lesson."

Severus remained silent and reached for her hands, tenderly loosening the wrappings. The muscles in his jaw worked, and his eyes grew stormy as he uncovered her raw flesh, covered in oozing pustules. The gentleness of his touch was quite at odds with the black expression on his face.

Hermione sighed with relief as he eased her hands into the bowl; the liquid felt cool on her swollen and irritated skin. "That feels so much better. I should have taken care of it myself, but I just rinsed off the pus with a quick *Aguamenti*."

"As you know, all outside mail is screened, so I know this," Hermione nodded at her hands, "is the work of someone at the Ministry. I was furious and stormed down to Mr. Anciano's office to complain. As my supervisor, I was sure he would be incensed that someone used the inter-office mail system to send threatening letters."

Severus watched as she examined her hands, pleased to see that the swelling was already markedly reduced. "I suppose, from your tone, he didn't react the way you expected?"

"Hardly!" Hermione snorted. "He had the audacity to look down his nose at me and tell me that if I focused more on my job and less on 'gadding about,' then perhaps I would have fewer inter-office conflicts. This from a man who couldn't find his arse with both hands and a map!" She gritted her teeth and practically growled. "Mark my words, Severus, without me he'll have that department run into the ground inside a week! Good riddance to him. I went back to my office, dictated a letter tendering my resignation as of end of business today, packed my office, and here I am." She let out a huge sigh. "Maybe it's better this way. Now I don't feel guilty about leaving them to flounder around without me."

"I do not think he should have the chance to run the department into the ground," Severus spat out. "His dismissal of your harassment is actionable. I urge you to report him."

He watched her capture her lower lip between her teeth. "Hermione, I know your opinion was that we should just ignore the editorial. But in light of this letter, and the implied threat of further action, we must go on the offensive." Severus paced to the stove with his usual grace, his heightened emotions seen only in the slight unsteadiness of his hands as he prepared their plates. "We must do whatever necessary to discover their identity. I've given up too much of my life to violence; I will not have you harmed." Severus looked over his shoulder at her, cold anger burning in his black eyes. "I may be a *former* Death Eater, but there are no lengths to which I won't go to protect those I care about."

Hermione knew better than to be stunned by his vehemence, but her heart swelled at this evidence of his feelings for her. She withdrew her much improved hands from the bowl drying them carefully on the towel he'd set out for her before moving to his side to lean up and kiss his cheek. "My opinion has changed, Severus," she said affectionately, "and while I think that we should avoid casting any Unforgivables just yet, I do have a suggestion, one with the added advantage of your *not* receiving another summons to visit with the Wizengamot." Hermione took their plates and returned to the table. "I would like to use your Floo to call Neville and accept the position he offered me. And then, if you don't object, I thought I'd call Harry."

"Potter?" Severus spun away from the stove to gape at her. "Why are you going to call him?" Though he and *The-Boy-Who-Lived-to-Annoy-the-Hell-Out-of-Him* had managed to put aside a great deal of their enmity, they would never be friends.

Harry and Ron had both been recovering in St. Mungo's when Hermione had offered to be Severus' Probational Monitor. Though she'd never said so, he was sure that, upon their recovery, there had been a flaming row full of screaming (Harry), thrown objects (Ron), and demands that they mind their own business (Hermione). But in the end, Harry and Ron had mostly come to terms with the fact that Hermione had never been one to be coddled and protected by them. They could either accept her current madness, or they could walk away from a friendship which had spanned seven years and a war. They chose the former, and in the few instances Severus had the *pleasure* of being in their company, he'd been given the same kind of odd consideration he imagined they had bestowed on all her pet projects.

"I know you like to scoff at his change of career, but it makes him happy, and maybe he can help us." Hermione's voice finally roused Severus from contemplation of his life as a P.I.M.P.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermione!" Severus refused to wince when she narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "Mr. Potter is your friend. The last thing you should be doing is encouraging him in this madness."

"There is no reason NOT to encourage him!" Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, gingerly tucking in her hands. "I think his experience as an Auror, his connections at the Ministry and his name alone will be beneficial." She chewed on her lip a moment before adding sheepishly, "At least it will probably help us in this case. Besides, just because you've never heard of a Magical Private Investigator, there's no reason to think it's not a good idea!"

"I do think it's a good idea!" Severus brought the plates to the table and set them down, taking his own seat. "For a children's book."

He grinned when she burst into laughter, but sobered quickly. "I do not object to you asking Potter to look into it. However, I would like it understood that should he fail to discover the culprit, I *will* use my own methods to do so. I would also prefer that we make an official report with the MLE." He picked up his fork and gestured to their plates. "Now if you could please let me enjoy my meal without further discussions of Potter's delusions of grandeur, I will allow you to use my Floo after dinner. You can make your calls while I clean up. It's obvious that you will be useless with those hands."

Hermione tilted her chin and batted her eyes coquettishly. "Be careful, Severus. You're in danger of turning my head with all your flattery."

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Hermione had decided to get the call to Harry out of the way first. He'd been outraged by her attack and worried for her, asking her repeatedly if she was alright. When she'd assured him that she was fine and explained what she wanted, he'd eagerly leapt at the chance to help her. She'd moved on to Neville and was just ending her conversation when Severus came into the room.

"Yes, yes! I said that I'll talk to him about it again, Neville. I believe that I've got him convinced, but if you would just ask him I'm sure..."

Neville's disembodied head shook violently. "No! I don't think he would take it seriously if I came to him. You know that he's always considered me a lost cause. I think that he'll respect me more if he sees me on my own turf." Neville laughed sheepishly. "No pun intended."

Hermione heard Severus enter the room and glanced at him before turning back to the Floo. "I've got to go, Neville, but I'll be in tomorrow to fill out all the paperwork. Thank you for offering me this opportunity. I'll do my best on that other thing."

"See you tomorrow, Hermione." Neville vanished in a whirl of green flames.

"What other thing?" Severus asked idly, taking her elbow to help her up from her position crouched in front of the flames and guiding her to the low couch that he'd transfigured earlier in the day.

Hermione kept her head down, knowing that he was easily able to read her face. "Just some things that Neville wants me to work on, ideas for the company. You know how the wizarding world is. If it hasn't been around for two thousand years, they don't trust it. We're going to have to be creative to gain acceptance for what he's doing."

"What is his company exactly?" Severus let go of her hand as she curled up on the couch and shook her head at his offer of a drink.

"Neville grows hybrid magical plants," Hermione answered as he settled next to her. "You know he's always had a rather green thumb."

Severus stifled a laugh. He hadn't been too far off when he'd pondered Longbottom's career path earlier. "I'm not sure how this is going to be a challenging position for you managing a greenhouse?"

Hermione's gaze slid away from him for a moment. "Several of the new strains that he's produced have caused some excitement in the medical field. He's been getting a lot of attention and offers to buy his stock, but he wants to work on developing the applications himself." Hermione shrugged and smiled. "I'm simply getting in on the ground floor to help him realize his vision."

"Will it make you happy?" Severus asked her, reaching for her hands and sliding his thumbs over her palms, thrilled to see that they were almost completely back to normal.

Her breath quickened and she shifted closer to him. "Not as happy as other things would make me."

"I find myself in the unusual position of not quite knowing how to proceed, Hermione." He lifted his free hand to brush her cheek. "I'm a complicated man, something I'm sure you know by now. I have feelings for you, feelings that have caught me unawares. I was prepared to be noble," he smiled ruefully, "and deny myself the chance to act on them in order to protect your reputation and your job. But in the space of a week, you've managed to remove most of the obstacles that I imagined were between us."

Hermione's eyes were soft as she leaned into his hand. "I'm not looking for uncomplicated, Severus. I know exactly what kind of man you are."

"The problem is that I'm not sure how we go from being *just friends* to being something more." He slid his hand into the heavy weight of her hair, cupping the back of her head. "But I think it might be something like this," he murmured as he lowered his lips to hers.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 5

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Severus chuckled and tucked his arms around her, running one hand down her bare back. "Well, I'd rather prefer that it was. It's not everyday that I wake up with a former student in my bed, and I'd rather that you not have a great deal of experience waking up with ex-professors."

She laughed and lightly slapped his side. "I guess it's something that we have to get used to together." She untucked her head and softly kissed his neck. "And as much as I'd like to start with that now, I told Neville I would be there first thing this morning." Reluctantly, she rolled away from him. "What are your plans for the day?" she asked as she climbed from his bed and began to hunt for her clothes.

Following their first kiss the night before, they'd decided to take things slow. After ten minutes of increasingly passionate embraces, they'd decided they had gone quite slow enough and relocated their journey of discovery to Severus' bed. In their enthusiasm, they had scattered clothes the length and breadth of the room.

"I thought I'd go ahead and work on my CV." Severus reclined against the pillow with his hands behind his head, enjoying himself as he watched her move around his room. "I don't expect it will do any good, but if it will keep me in your good graces," he playfully leered at her as she cast a Cleansing Charm before stepping into her knickers, "I'm willing to send it off, but I have to make a few changes to it first."

"Like what?" Hermione asked, sliding her arms into her robe.

"For instance, I thought it might be best if I left off the part that says *Minion to Dark Lord 1978-1998*.' What do you think?" he drawled.

Hermione's hands stilled on her buttons, and she lifted her head to see him smirking at her. She wondered if that look was always going to make her want him as much as it did right now. She crossed to his side of the bed, raking her eyes down his body to where the sheets were tented.

When she spoke, her breathy voice belied her nonchalance. "As much as I'd like to stay and help you, I've really got to go, or I'm going to be late."

She leaned over to kiss him, then shrieked when Severus pulled her down, rolling her underneath him. "You can't give me a look like that and expect me to just let you walk out of here," he growled, using one hand to unbutton the robes she'd just put on, kissing each new expanse of flesh that he uncovered. "Besides, Mr. Longbottom always struck me as the patient type."

[illegible]

Hermione was late, but found that Severus was right and Neville didn't mind.

"We're just doing paperwork today, Hermione." Neville smiled at her absently while he searched his desk for something, although how he expected to find anything on the cluttered surface was beyond her. Already, she could feel her fingers itching to start organizing everything. "It wasn't something that couldn't wait if you were busy."

Hermione blushed and looked away, pretending to study the complete lack of décor in the utilitarian office. She wondered if Neville suspected why she was late, and his next words confirmed that he did.

"Especially if you were busy convincing Professor Snape that he should apply for the position." Neville laughed when she ducked her head. "Una mentioned that she thought things were going in that direction. I'm happy for you, both of you." Finally finding what he was searching for, he pushed a file across the desk toward her. "I think all the right forms are in there." He rose and came around the desk. "If you'd like, though, I can give you a tour of the facility before you get started on them."

Hermione agreed eagerly and followed him to the door. "You know, Neville, you've never told me what made you think of Severus for the Potions position in the first place. Surely there are other potions experts you could have hired?"

Neville sighed as he opened the door and gestured her through. "There are, and I think that I've heard from every one of them in the last two weeks. They may all be brilliant, but I *know* what Professor Snape is capable of." Neville escorted her down the hallway to what would be her office. "My latest strain of Mandrake, grafted with a derivative of Lavender, then cross bred with Belladonna, has shown remarkable potential in the application of potions, particularly potions designed to help reverse the devastating effects of long-term exposure to the Cruciatus Curse." His voice grew more excited. "You know how much it would mean to me to find a cure for my parents, even something that would allow them a better quality of life."

Hermione laid her hand on his arm and squeezed gently as they stood at a large picture window overlooking a multitude of greenhouses.

"Somewhere out there lies the cure for them." He gestured out the window before leading her to a flight of stairs, which descended below ground.

"Unfortunately, you know that I don't excel at potions." He forestalled Hermione's protest with a grin. "Oh, I do well enough when I've got a set of guidelines to go by, and when I'm not terrified."

Hermione laughed at his self-deprecating humour, looking around in fascination as he showed her a state-of-the-art potions lab.

"But I don't have that innate sixth-sense to create new potions. I could spend the rest of my life working on it, but what purpose would that serve? I may not be brilliant at many things, but I've always excelled at knowing the right people to ask for help."

He playfully jostled Hermione with his shoulder, directing her through a long tunnel, containing the habitats for his varieties that preferred a subterranean environment. He stopped to point out his Devil's Snare that had proven to be especially useful as a deterrent to household pests, once its violent tendencies had been dampened by a grain of Sneezewort.

"I probably should have thought of Professor Snape right away, but instead I spent weeks rolling the problem around my head, until suddenly I remembered that potions book of Harry's from sixth year. It would have been difficult to forget the rows that you two got into over that old thing."

Hermione scowled at him as he guided her through a door at the end of the tunnel and into the bright sunlight.

"If Professor Snape's adjustments to basic potions could cause Harry to surpass *you*, then I knew he must be incredibly skilled ... innovatively skilled." Neville snickered at Hermione's expression as they walked past the rows of greenhouses, the air redolent with the loamy scent of rich soil and thriving vegetation.

Hermione took a deep breath as they walked back in the direction of the administration building, enjoying the feel of the sun on her shoulders and the aroma of grass and fresh air. She couldn't help but be reminded of a time when she took such simple pleasures for granted. Neville looked over at her with a sad smile. "It always makes me think of Professor Sprout," he said, a wave of his hand indicating the greenhouses surrounded by neat rows of herbs and flowering plants.

"She would be so proud of what you have done here." Hermione patted his arm as she walked through the door he was holding open for her.

"Yes, I think she would." Neville passed a hand over his eyes and sighed. "What were we talking about?"

"You were telling me what made you think of Severus for the position."

"Oh! Yeah, well, you know everything after that. I came to you with my ridiculous plan to place that advertisement and have you encourage him to apply. Now my desk is groaning under the flood of applications I receive daily, and I wish that I'd listened to you and just asked him." He gestured to his desk as they re-entered his office.

"Between the applications and the offers to buy my *wonder plants*, I didn't think I'd ever be able to get back to my greenhouses." He turned to her and grasped her hands.

"Thank Merlin you're here now!"

Finis