

Snapewatch

by a_bees_buzz

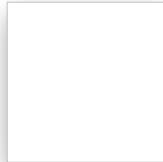
The end of the war should have been a time for happily-ever-afters. For Severus Snape, it was the beginning of the greatest torment of all. He had survived the meddling of a master manipulator and the machinations of a mad megalomaniac, only to find himself subjected to the whims of an annoying know-it-all.



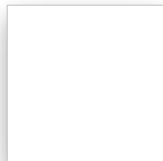
Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

The end of the war should have been a time for happily-ever-afters. For Severus Snape, it was the beginning of the greatest torment of all. He had survived the meddling of a master manipulator and the machinations of a mad megalomaniac, only to find himself subjected to the whims of an annoying know-it-all.



A/N: This story was originally written for the winter 2007 sshg_exchange. Much belated thanks go to my magnificent beta, Bambu345.



Voldemort had been dead for hours when the penny dropped.

"Harry? HARRY!" Hermione found him ensconced in a sofa in what remained of the Gryffindor common room and pried him off Ginny. A quick glance assured her that

Ginny's initially-alarming state of dishevelment owed more to Harry's pawing than any sort of battle damage. "You can do that later. What was it you said about Professor Snape?"

"What?" Harry was obviously not happy. "The first decent snog I've had in a year, and you break it up for a dead man?"

"A horrible, greasy git of a dead man," added a pouting Ginny.

"Who happened to be responsible for your killing Voldemort, or have you decided to forget that part now that it's over?"

Harry dragged himself to his feet while Ginny huffed her discontent. "No. I haven't forgotten. But he's still dead."

"He doesn't have to be. Remember in Godric's Hollow, when you were bitten? I cured you with dittany." Hermione began pacing, her hands waving about wildly in between moments of clutching at her extremely bedraggled hair. "I didn't think of it at the time. No, that's not true. I just didn't think he was worth wasting the time on. Don't you see?"

She stopped to glare at Harry as if it were all his fault, but he didn't notice, being distracted by the view of Ginny re-buttoning her blouse.

"Harry? Are you even listening to me? Harry! This is important."

"Yeah. Sure. Dittany, right?" Harry made a valiant effort and managed to tear his gaze away from the flash of bare midriff as a smirking Ginny tucked her top into her skirt.

"I could have saved him, but I didn't. I made the judgment that his life wasn't worth saving, that he was just a Death Eater. What right did I have to make that choice?" She resumed pacing as Harry and Ginny exchanged knowing glances. Hermione was on a quest now, and her friends knew there would be no stopping her. "And then it wasn't even true." She dragged her hands through her hair. Well, she tried to. In practice, this meant that her hands processed triumphantly a full three or four inches into her hair before becoming hopelessly entangled. Hermione didn't seem to notice, continuing with her diatribe apparently oblivious to the fact that her hands were stuck to her head at odd angles. "After everything he did, can you honestly say he deserved what he got?"

"No. But, Hermione, you can't blame yourself. There was a lot going on. You and Ron had to go after the Basilisk fangs, or we wouldn't have been able to destroy the Hufflepuff cup. If we'd all taken the time to help everyone we came across, we'd never have managed it."

"I know. But we have time now." Her hands worked themselves free of her hair without any apparent conscious effort on her part. "Just not very much of it. If I could get a Time-Turner, I could go back to just after we left. He was unconscious, but it would have taken a while for him to die. Remember Mr. Weasley last summer? Please, Harry. I can save him."

"Snape? You want to save Snape?" Ginny stopped pouting and turned indignant. "What about my brother? Or doesn't he rate your attention? Or Remus, or Tonks? She's lost it Harry. You can't let her go around playing goddess, deciding who lives and who dies. She's got a big enough head already."

"No, she's right. We can't do anything about the rest of them. They really died, we saw them. But no one saw Snape die. He can be saved."

"And surely he deserves it after all he's done for us. Right, Harry? You'll help me?" Hermione pleaded.

"No, he won't. And I'll tell you why. I didn't wait around an entire year just to have you take him away from me again. You had your chance in your little camping love-nest, and he chose me. So back off. The war's over, he's done playing hero for you. He's mine now." That was what Ginny thought. What she actually said was, "I don't suppose we'll get any peace until you agree. I'll go see how Mum is doing." With that, she flounced off.

Harry knew she couldn't be too angry, since she maintained the presence of mind to twirl away quickly enough to flash a bit of leg. "How much time do we have?"

"The standard Time-Turner will only take you back one day, so we need to find one in the next few hours."

"Department of Mysteries?"

Hermione shook her head. "Too difficult. Remus or Tonks could have got us in, but I can't think of another Auror who'd trust us without asking a lot of questions. Besides, we don't know if they restocked after the destruction last time we were there. But I think there's one in the Headmaster's office. When Dumbledore gave me mine, he said it was something they had on hand. It might still be there."

They picked their way through the rubble-strewn halls of the castle to find the Headmaster's office in the same shambles it had been hours earlier when Harry had watched Snape's memories. After trying an *Accio*, they began searching, but the first drawer Harry tried to open bit him.

"Looking for something, Potter?" the Sorting Hat asked from its perch on the mantelpiece.

"A Time-Turner. Do you know where it's kept?"

"Those are not for students. Nor is it my place to reveal the secrets of this school."

"Your place? We're not students and *your place* is about to be *Incendio'd*," Hermione declared, pointing her wand at the hat.

"Granger, isn't it? You were always a good child. Destined to be Head Girl, if circumstances had allowed. You would not harm an ancient relic."

"No?" She aimed a careful *Incendio* that took the edge off one side of the hat's brim. As the hat attempted to skitter away across the mantelpiece, getting caught in the clutter of priceless bibelots, she took aim again. "The next shot takes out the point. Now talk, you pathetic piece of pontificating haberdashery!"

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They waited outside the Shrieking Shack, standing huddled under Harry's cloak, until they saw themselves leave. Snape was right where they'd left him on the dusty floor, nearly a day before. Hermione performed the wound-closing spell she'd learnt before they set off on the Horcrux hunt and then applied the dittany. There was a good-sized crimson puddle the floor, but the blood loss shouldn't have been enough to kill him. Once the poison was neutralized, he should start to ...

"Bloody hell, Potter. I told you to go. Voldemort isn't going to kill himself, you know." Even lying flat on his back, unmoving in a pool of his own blood, Snape managed to sound intimidating.

"Actually, he did, sir. Hours ago. We came back for you." It was Hermione who answered, Harry being more than a little stunned at how quickly the potion had worked.

Snape looked from one to the other. "Then what are you two doing here? At the very least, I should think that I have earned a peaceful death. Be gone, and let me die."

"You don't mean that, sir." Hermione's tone was almost scolding. "Voldemort has been defeated; you have your whole life ahead of you."

"If I had wanted a life ahead of me, do you imagine I would have allowed a mere serpent to kill me? Or is your mind too feeble to grasp the concept of a Potions master? Hmm?"

"But, Professor, there are so many possibilities."

"I can think of only one."

"And what is that?"

"That I will recover my strength sufficiently to hex you into oblivion so I may die in peace."

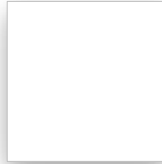
She turned to Harry, who was shaking his head and grimacing, knowing full well what was coming. "That's it. We can't leave him on his own."

Harry groaned.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

The end of the war should have been a time for happily-ever-afters. For Severus Snape, it was the beginning of the greatest torment of all. He had survived the meddling of a master manipulator and the machinations of a mad megalomaniac, only to find himself subjected to the whims of an annoying know-it-all.



"Surely you must be able find some better use for your time," the erstwhile Potions master commented with a sneer. He was ensconced in his usual seat, a comfortable, Moroccan leather armchair strategically located in the corner of the sitting room with the best view of both the front entrance hall and the door to the kitchen. Situated in front of the window to catch the afternoon light, and to one side of the fireplace for winter warmth, it was the only comfortable chair in the shabby house, and no one else ever dared to try and sit in it. "Books to read. Authority figures to pester. Gainful employment, perhaps?"

"I'm well paid for my work here," Hermione replied primly as she joined him in the sitting room after cleaning up the lunch things. The kitchen at Spinner's End was serviceable, if only just. She couldn't understand why Severus insisted on keeping the dining room shut up, making it necessary to shoehorn a table and chairs into the tiny kitchen, but it was not a subject he was willing to discuss.

"Leaving aside for the moment your tenuous understanding of the meaning of the word 'work', who, may I ask, would pay to have a grown man babysat against his will?"

Hermione lowered herself carefully into the armchair opposite his; it was possible, if not easy, to sit in such a way that none of the broken springs poked through the tattered damask upholstery into any sensitive spots.

The post-meal chats had become one of her favourite parts of the day. While eating, Severus' comments were limited to critiquing her cooking skills, and once the food had settled, he generally stared out the window and moped. It was only in the interval between meals and mopes that they had any real conversation. "The Severus Snape Rehabilitation Foundation."

He sat up and tilted his head forward to the precise angle that maximized the hooding of the glare while minimizing eyebrow interference. "If there is any mercy in the universe, you have just made a rather pathetic attempt at humor."

"It's not a joke." Well, not one she would admit to, anyway. "You are considered the third greatest hero of the war. As soon as I publicized your plight and explained the need for a round-the-clock suicide watch to save your life, contributions came in from all over Britain. It seems that a rather large number of your ex-students are willing to donate their hard-earned Galleons to ensure that a bunch of eager, do-gooder, cheerful Gryffindors can sit around and watch you be miserable. All the contributor's get badges; they've become quite popular." She pulled an oval green badge out of her pocket and held it up for his inspection.



Severus' eyes grew rounder and wider than she had imagined possible. "I see that I have underestimated you, Miss Granger. You are a more ... creative ... torturer than I would have credited. Riddle could have taken lessons in cruelty."

"Don't be silly, Severus. I'm just here to take care of you."

It amused her no end the way he flinched every time she said his name.

In the silence that followed, she picked up the book she had left on the side-table the evening before and pretended to read, surreptitiously checking her watch every minute or two. She didn't think it would take long.

"Third?"

Seven and a half minutes. He'd held out longer than she'd expected. "Pardon?"

"I presume that the public considers the highly overrated Mr. Potter to be the greatest hero of the war, meaning that I have displaced either yourself or the youngest Weasley male from the third position. The only question is which one. This is a question in which I would have no interest, except that it occurs to me that the answer has the potential of solving the mystery of your obsessive vendetta against me. Is it, perhaps, explicable as a misguided grudge for my having unwittingly stolen some shred of your indubitably well earned thunder? Hmm?"

Putting her book down, she attempted to look innocent. It was not a particularly successful attempt. "Neither, actually. You line up third after Neville Longbottom."

His look of horror was something she would treasure for a very long time.

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It was a very smug Hermione who walked up to the front door of the cottage at Spinner's End a few days later. Molly had been on watch for the night shift, and all should be extremely unwell.

"How was he?"

"Oh, my dear," Molly sighed deeply as she donned her cloak and bonnet, "he's not improving at all, I'm afraid. Nothing seems to cheer him up, though goodness knows I've tried my best. Just now he even managed to find fault with the sausages I fixed for his breakfast. As if I didn't know how to cook a proper sausage. I tell you, Hermione, I'm at my wit's end."

"Do you know, Molly? I think you do make a difference. He seems much better after you've been. Even Minerva has commented on it."

"Has she really?" Molly wiped away a small welling of moisture that had been considering the possibility of forming into a teardrop in the corner of her eye and pulled herself up, her shoulders hunching slightly in a valiant effort to square themselves. "Well then, I think I could manage a couple of extra shifts next week. What the poor dear needs is a warm, loving environment, and I've plenty of time, what with all my little ones flown the nest."

"I'm sure he appreciates it. Even if he can't bring himself to say the words." Hermione patted Molly's ample arm and ushered her out the door before heading into the sitting room to check on the prisoner patient.

She found him standing before the fireplace, scowling at the doorway as she entered. "How much longer should I expect to suffer this torment?"

"Are you asking me to change the terms of your confinement?"

"I am merely inquiring as to the length of my sentence."

"That's a shame. Asking for change would indicate that you are taking an interest in your future. It would be seen as a positive sign."

There was a moment of silence as he struggled to form the words. "Very well, Miss Granger. May I ... please ... be left alone?"

"No."

"What more do you want from me, you foul harridan?" he snarled, advancing menacingly towards her. "You have accomplished what neither Riddle nor Dumbledore could: reducing me to groveling. Surely that should count for something. What will it take to satisfy your unnatural fascination with my person?"

"Severus, dear," she replied in her best Dolores Umbridge manner as he loomed over her, "you have only to demonstrate that you have accepted your ongoing existence and plan to make yourself a useful and productive member of society."

"And if I do, you will cease inflicting the Weasley matriarch upon me?"

Hermione smiled sweetly. "Oh, my. Do you not care for Molly? I had no idea."

It was as if the sheer force of his snort had propelled him backwards. He fell gracelessly into his customary chair. "You are no doubt aware that you are incapable of telling falsehoods without giving yourself away. Tell me, Miss Granger. Why do you bother?"

"Why do I bother telling falsehoods or why do I bother with you?"

"Both."

Taking off her cloak and hanging it in the front-closet, she replied, "I bother with you because I will not allow another innocent life to be lost to this war." She ignored his contemptuous harrumphing at her use of the word "innocent" and continued. "And I tell falsehoods because you have shown no interest in hearing the truth."

"You have my undivided attention," he said, his words belied by his posture as he leant his head back and closed his eyes. "Enlighten me," he added in bored tones.

Hermione settled delicately into the other chair. "I'm worried about you. We all are. You sneer and snarl and posture as if nothing had changed, but you show no interest in anything outside of this house. That's not like you. Tell me the truth. If we left you alone, would you buy yourself groceries? Fix meals? Or would you wallow in your own misery and slowly fade away?"

"What I choose to do with my life is my own business. I fail to see how it is any concern of yours."

"Decree 447 subsection 14-B makes it my business," she replied.

Decree 447 ensured the care of those injured, widowed or orphaned by the fight against Voldemort. Harry had insisted on it in return for his support for the new Minister for Magic. It was the only thing he wanted after the war was over, other than to be allowed to snog Ginny as often as humanly possible. Hermione had taught him how to heal his constantly chapped lips in return for the addition of section 14.

Often referred to as the Snotter clause, since it only applied to Harry and Severus, section 14 dealt with the special case of those who had given their lives without actually being dead, granting them special status and making their continued wellbeing an obligation of the Ministry. Subsection A (which the Minister for Magic had inserted without Harry's knowledge) granted them stipends, ensuring that neither would ever have to work if they did not choose. Subsection B stated that both the wand and the care of one Severus Snape was to be given over to a Ministry-appointed guardian until such time as said guardian verified his recovery from the traumatic damage to his psyche from his near-death experience. Shacklebolt had wasted no time in appointing Hermione as Severus' guardian.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Severus asked, "And what, pray tell, would free me from the terms of subsection 14-B?"

"Now that you ask, I would rather like to see you doing something useful with your time."

"I suppose you have something in mind?"

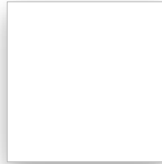
This time her smile was genuine. "As it happens, I do."

A/N: Thanks as always for the brilliant beta skills of Bambu345. The emblem for the badge was a gift from the lovely and clever Pokeystar.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

The end of the war should have been a time for happily-ever-afters. For Severus Snape, it was the beginning of the greatest torment of all. He had survived the meddling of a master manipulator and the machinations of a mad megalomaniac, only to find himself subjected to the whims of an annoying know-it-all.



A/N: Thanks, as always, for the brilliant beta work of Bambu345.

As per the terms set by the Ministry for Magic, Hermione Granger entered the classroom precisely five minutes before the beginning of class and administered a dose of Veritaserum to Severus Snape. There was no question that it was properly brewed to full potency and effectiveness; Hermione had made sure of that by having Severus brew it himself.

The first meeting of the special potions NEWT preparatory class had been long in the planning. Other preparatory classes, set up for those who had either missed or been distracted during their seventh year due to the war, had been in progress for some time. With the repairs having been completed over the summer, Hogwarts Castle had plenty of extra classrooms, and there was no shortage of volunteers to serve as instructors.

It was, however, January already, and the examinations were scheduled for March. There was a great deal of material to be covered in a very short time. (There were some who thought to ask why another Potions teacher had not been found, one who could begin the work earlier, maybe even one who was less of an evil, greasy git. For reasons that have never been adequately explained, no one ever asked that question twice.)

In return for being excused from the twenty-four-hour-per-day, seven-day-a-week watch, Severus had agreed to some rather unusual restrictions on his teaching style. Above and beyond the Veritaserum.

"So we can get away with anything we like in here, can we?" Draco asked as he deliberately spilled an entire container of lacewing flies into his cauldron.

As the potion bubbled over, spilling onto the desk and flowing onto the floor, Professor Snape replied, "That is true. In here."

Draco sat back in his chair and smirked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The professor went to the supply closet and fetched a bucket, sponges and a mop. He began cleaning the mess by hand, slowly and meticulously. "Not only can I not prevent you from foolish behavior, I am likewise incapable of requiring that you clean up after yourself. When you make a mess, I will clean it. The more time that I waste cleaning up your little messes, the less instruction the entire class will receive. I am not in a position to discipline you, nor do I have the power to reduce your grades. However, the NEWT examiners are under no such restrictions. I was under the impression that some of you had reason to wish to pass those exams."

"That almost sounded like a threat, Snape," Draco drawled. He turned to Hermione. "Are you going to let him get away with that?" The students had all been informed that Hermione alone was entitled to enforce the Ministry directives. Draco was not the only one eager to find out exactly what that meant and whether they'd be allowed to watch.

"All I heard was a simple recital of the facts. It is hardly Professor Snape's responsibility to shield you from the harsh realities of life," she replied primly.

"Merlin's balls, Granger," Draco grumbled. "The man spends years tormenting you, and now you've got him under your thumb, you don't even use it. Figures a bloody Gryffindor'd find a way to take all the fun out of a perfect set up."

"The last time I checked, Malfoy," she replied snappishly, "you owed him your life. It seems to me that we all owe the professor a little respect."

If she had expected any sort of acknowledgement from the professor under discussion, she would have been disappointed. Fortunately for her, she hadn't expected it.

When the mess was cleaned, the lesson resumed. This time, the lacewing flies were carefully measured. "Can anyone explain why an excess of lacewing flies causes an explosive reaction?"

As usual, Hermione raised her hand.

"No one? Pity."

As Severus turned to the chalkboard, Neville called out, "Why didn't you call on Hermione? Her hand was up."

Severus whirled back to face Neville. "Tell me, Mr. Longbottom. Is there the smallest shred of doubt in your mind that Miss Granger knows the answer?"

"No. Of course she does." Neville managed to look perplexed rather than terrified, which demonstrated considerable personal growth on his part, though he did hunch his shoulders just a smidge. "Hermione always knows the answers."

"Precisely. There is nothing to be gained by calling on Miss Granger. When I ask questions in my classroom, it is to ascertain what, if anything, the rest of you know." With his usually flourish, he turned back to the board to write out (by hand) the citations for looking up the properties of lacewing flies. Being unable to assign essays was not going to make him hand them information they were perfectly capable of looking up for themselves. Not that day, anyway.

Hermione never raised her hand again in his class. The following week, however, at the end of a particularly accident-ridden double session, when no one could answer Professor Snape's question about the importance of the freshness of hellebore root, instead of giving them citations and sending them to the library, he shook his head and said, "Then perhaps Miss Granger will be so kind as to explain it to you ... ill-informed ... children."

Despite Draco's repeated whining, Hermione had refused to expand the official list of "demeaning epithets not to be used in the classroom." Not that Severus Snape needed them. Being unable to use terms like "dunderheads" or "idiots" was hardly enough to crimp the professor's inimitable style. Severus was perfectly capable of injecting sufficient invective into terms like "children" and "adolescents" to make them sound like curses. True disdain he expressed in question forms, which neatly evaded the whole Veritaserum problem. He could reduce Neville to a quivering mass merely by asking, "How is it possible that a fine upstanding wizard such as yourself can feed himself, if he cannot manage to manoeuvre a bare teaspoon's worth of Billywig parts into a cauldron without spilling half of it? Hmm? Do you require help getting your food into your mouth? Or do you simply stick your face in the bowl?"

Draco cringed every time he was asked how he ever expected to accomplish the monumental task of restoring the tarnished Malfoy name if he couldn't even manage to follow simple written directions. However he tried, though, Severus simply could not manage to bother Harry.

"Is this the best that our great and revered hero can accomplish? One must wonder how you managed to achieve such an exalted position in our society with such meager abilities. Tell me, Mr. Potter, have you ever accomplished anything on your own, or are all your greatly vaunted deeds the results of the interventions of others?" When Harry's only response was a happy smile, Severus felt compelled to ask, "Is there something that amuses you about this situation, Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Really? And would you care to share it with the rest of us? I, for one, am sorely in need of having my spirits lifted lest I weep at the abysmal failures of the younger generation."

Draco mouthed the word "abysmal" hopefully at Hermione, but she just shook her head. The professor hadn't, technically, called any of them abysmal, so it didn't count as an insult. Hermione was stickler for the letter of the law, and Severus knew exactly how to skirt its boundaries without ever crossing them.

It is doubtful whether any punishment Hermione might have meted out would have had quite as devastating an effect on Severus as Harry's reply to his question. "I'm just happy to have you back, sir. Every time you find a way to demean us, I'm reminded that we almost lost you. It tickles me to be able to hear you rant again."

Happy? Tickle? His attempts to chastise the little fools were a source of joy and amusement? Severus continued to find ways to berate his students, but from that moment on, his heart was never really in it.

Perhaps it was that, the change in attitude, the gentler (no, Severus Snape was still not gentle) the less-harsh (yes, that would do) professor that emboldened Neville Longbottom to attempt something that had never been tried.

"How should I have done it?"

The entire class froze. No one had ever dared to actually ask Professor Snape for instruction before. One muddled along as best as one could and counted on Hermione to explain things later. Or looked it up. Deliberately attracting Professor Snape's attention in class was asking for trouble. Doing so when he had just criticized your work was nothing less than suicidal. At least, it had been in the past. There really wasn't much of anything that he could do anymore beyond blustering.

The Veritaserum compelled the professor to answer anything he was asked, though it did permit him to sneer as he demonstrated the correct technique.

The next day, Lavender asked for help with her titration, and Ron asked whether he should try a different grip on his stirring rod.

One week later, Hermione arrived for class with Ron and Neville and took her seat.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes, Professor Snape."

"Have you, perhaps, forgotten something?"

"No, Professor Snape. I don't believe I have."

Under her watchful eye, the professor continued to answer their questions, even without the compulsion of Veritaserum.

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The rest of the class was off to the Leaky to celebrate the end of their NEWTs, but Hermione had something she needed to take care of first.

Arriving at Spinner's End, she found Severus (and she felt free to call him Severus again, now that he was no longer her teacher) no more hospitable or cheerful than he had been on any of her prior visits. She did, however, take it as a positive sign when she saw a book on the side table. Reading implied an interest in ... well, an interest anyway. It had to be an improvement over staring out the window and sulking.

"I thought you'd like to know that the examiners said we'd all done well. They seemed very impressed."

He settled into his chair and rested his elbows on its arms, tenting his fingers in front of him. "I fail to see what concern it is of mine how you or your fellow students perform on your exams. My obligation ends when the classroom door closes."

"You were a really good teacher once you stopped your usual bullying. You should go back to it." She thought she might have managed to suppress the pleading tone in her words. Maybe.

"Let me assure you, Miss Granger, that, given the choice, I would prefer to spend quality time with Nagini than ever set foot in a Potions classroom again. I have fulfilled the terms of your conditions. May I take it that my subjugation to your whims is now at an end?"

She stiffened. "Not quite. My original concerns still hold; you have not convinced me that you are reconciled to your continued existence."

"Oh, I intend to live a very long time," he snarled, "if only to have the satisfaction of proving that, in this one instance, the all-knowing Hermione Granger got it wrong."

If he insisted on continuing the hostilities, he would not find her wanting. "Yes, but you would say that, wouldn't you? Whether it was true or not."

"You have access to the very highest quality of Veritaserum. I can brew another batch if your supply has run low."

Hermione gingerly took the seat opposite his and adopted her now-familiar condescendingly sweet tone. "Did you know that there has never been a test to determine if it's possible to build up a resistance to Veritaserum? In fact, I can't find a single record of a case where anyone was exposed to it more than a few times. Until now, of course. It is entirely possible that it no longer works on you. And your comment about preferring to meet Nagini over returning to work, that's not exactly promising, is it?"

"What more do you want from me?" he growled.

"Not much. You will be allowed to make your own choices from now on, live your own life, but there will be regular checks to see how you're doing. Consider it parole."

"Let me guess. My parole officer will be ... hmmm ... who might be willing to take on such a task? Could it possibly be ... yourself, Miss Granger?"

She smiled. "Weekly meetings, Severus. Shall we say, Wednesdays? I'm starting work at the Ministry of Magic, so it will have to be in the evenings."

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

The end of the war should have been a time for happily-ever-afters. For Severus Snape, it was the beginning of the greatest torment of all. He had survived the meddling of a master manipulator and the machinations of a mad megalomaniac, only to find himself subjected to the whims of an annoying know-it-all.



A/N: Much thanks to my brilliant beta, Bambu345.

Disclaimer: The attitudes expressed on the respectability of specific sexual acts are those of the characters, not the writer. Ditto for the culinary choices, which should not be taken as a recommendation of greasy takeaway for either nutritive or romantic purposes.

It was a George evening, and George evenings were always good. The twins had never been able to resist the allure of performing to an audience, and even without his sidekick (now that Fred wasn't around to argue the point, George always insisted that Fred had been the sidekick, "and any comedian worth his salt can manage without a sidekick"), George rose to the challenge of entertaining a sullen, resentful, retired Potions master with verve and flair. Well, verve anyway. Hermione had put strict limits on his flair after the incident with the Flaming Florescent Farts. Ex-Death Eaters, it seems, respond instinctively to flashes of green light with rather strong counter-curses, even when those flashes are located on the arses of unsuspecting, bushy-haired, young women.

Outside of a small, drab little house at Spinner's End that looked precisely like every other drab little house on the street, not to mention every drab little house on the next street and the one after that, Hermione cast a detection charm at George.

"You don't have to do that, you know. I promise I haven't brought anything inflammatory."

"You mean besides your wit? And what, pray tell, is this?" she asked, *Levicorpus*ing an odd-looking, lumpy object out from under his shirt collar.

"It's to help me hear, that's all. Really, Hermione, you can trust me."

She did not deign to dignify that claim with a response, simply lowering the suspicious item to the ground beside the door and covering it in both a containment field and a Do Not Notice Charm before knocking.

Severus opened the door with a peculiar expression on his face. It was ... feral. "Do come in."

Hermione entered cautiously, her eyes immediately latching onto the short, balding man standing behind Severus. He was oddly dressed in an old-fashioned suit that didn't look quite right for a Muggle, but wasn't clearly wizard-like either. "You have company? I didn't realize. We could come another evening."

"Not if it means we don't get to wrap our mouths around this takeaway you've brought," George declared, coming in behind her and taking the bag out of her hand. "Did you remember the extra-spicy vindaloo?"

"Of course I did. And the chicken korma for Severus. I'll just put the naan in the cooker to reheat, if we're staying?" She looked to Severus for confirmation.

He still had that feral look. "Certainly. Dr. Thistlethwaite is just leaving." As Hermione headed through the sitting room to the kitchen beyond, Severus ushered his guest to the front door and bade him a polite, but utterly unrevealing, farewell.

"Doctor?" Hermione queried as Severus followed George into the kitchen.

"No. Potions master. Or mister. Those are the only titles I answer to these days."

She glared at him briefly before sorting out the foil boxes, peeling off the cardboard lids to reveal steaming curries in greens and reds and yellows, assorted fried morsels, and fragrant rice. There was enough food for half-a-dozen hungry mouths; with only three, Severus would have leftovers for days. "You know what I meant. Who is Dr. Thistlethwaite?"

"I was not aware that I was required to report to you on my social life," Severus replied, his enjoyment of her discomfort evident by the sneering curl of his upper lip.

George grinned until Hermione glared at him, whereupon he fetched the plates and began setting the table. They were old and cracked, and one had a chip out of the rim, but Severus had flatly refused to let Hermione replace them. Without being certain of his reasons, she had been hesitant to force him to abandon what might be cherished mementos. Maybe even of his dead mother.

"I was merely asking," said Hermione snappishly. She turned away, towards the cabinet where the mismatched glassware was kept, wondering when exactly Severus had managed to acquire a social life. Perhaps Dr. Thistlethwaite was a medical doctor, or a non-doctorly imposter brought in expressly to confuse her.

"Indeed." Severus stepped in front of Hermione. "Allow me. I prefer not to spend the evening repairing broken dishes."

It was only then that she noticed her hands were trembling.

As they ate, George told the story of a witch who had brought her two nieces into the shop, ostensibly to buy them each a treat. The witch, it seems, was more interested in trying to treat herself to a newly decorated, if slightly damaged, war hero than in watching over her charges. By the time she managed to tear herself away from George's

devastating charms, the little dears had managed to set off an entire carton of Exploding Envelopes, which had, in turn, set off half a shelf's worth of Sputtering Spinners. As soon as she chased down one naughty bit of baggage, the other would find her way into the Canary Creams or Spotting Smarties or Chin-wiggling Choccies until neither of the girls was recognizable for all the odd appendages, feathers and blotches they were sporting. When the witch finally got her charges under control, she turned to George to ask why he hadn't bothered to help.

"Well, I couldn't, could I?" I told her, cool as you like. 'Too busy totting up your bill.' It was over thirty Galleons, too. Biggest sale of the day, that."

"I don't expect you'll be enjoying any repeat business from that particular young lady," Severus commented, his mouth still twitching at the corners with suppressed amusement at George's description of the children's antics.

George shrugged nonchalantly. "Business is good. Besides, I don't much care for the hero groupies. Find them a bit annoying, really. Don't you?"

"I wouldn't know."

It was difficult to tell if Severus was sneering at the concept of groupies or his own lack of social contact, but Hermione chose to ignore the ambiguity. "You could, if you wanted to ..."

"There is nothing out there I want," he said firmly, cutting off her all-too-common effort at convincing him to investigate the possibilities offered by the outside world.

It was George who broke the tension, suggesting, "Except a good vindaloo now and then, of course."

After a barely noticeable pause, Severus conceded the point. "True. But I have Miss Granger to bring me that."

Hermione snorted. "That seems to be all I'm good for these days, fetching and carrying."

Severus sat back in his chair. "And how is Mr. Finch-Fletchley these days?"

Hermione's supervisor in the Department of International Magical Cooperation was Jason Finch-Fletchley. Unlike his younger brother Justin, Jason was a pompous arse. Hermione was his first underling, and he wanted to be certain that his move into management was widely known. In pursuit of which goal, he made a habit of sending Hermione on useless errands to places where she'd be seen to perform tasks that involved mentioning his name.

With a hint of a blush, Hermione replied, "I suspect he may not be sending me to the Owlery again any time soon."

"No?"

"I ..." She stared at her plate as she confessed, "When I went to collect his post, I may have called him 'Finch-Felching' by accident."

"NNNGGG?"

Both Severus and Hermione looked up in alarm as George squeaked. Then he found his breath and began roaring with laughter. "That's brilliant, Hermione," he gasped. "That'll teach the little blighter."

As Hermione's blush deepened to a bright red, Severus asked, "'Felching'? I'm not familiar with that term."

At that, George became so convulsed with mirth that he was beyond words, and Hermione was forced to answer. "It's a Muggle thing; it's to do with sex."

Severus' eyebrow didn't quite quirk, but it did twitch. "Have the Muggles discovered a new way to do it?"

Hermione's blush wasn't fading in the slightest. Of course, with the way she was shifting in her seat, it might have been from the exercise. "No, of course not. At least, I don't think so. I wouldn't know."

As George fell out of his chair, Hermione glared at him. "It's something men do with men," she explained. "With tongues and ... bottoms."

"Ah. A form of Aberforth," Severus replied with a smirk.

It was Hermione's turn to be confused. "Aberforth?"

"Deviant sexual behaviour. I trust I do not need to explain the origins of the term to you."

"No. Of course not. Though the term 'deviant' is a bit strong, isn't it? I don't think one should judge such things."

"Miss Granger. After twenty years acquaintance with the Lestranges, I believe I am fully qualified to judge what is, and what is not, deviant."

She nodded slowly, conceding the point.

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The mystery of Dr. Thistlethwaite was revealed a few days later when Hermione received an owl from the doctor, suggesting they meet.

She went to see him in his offices, an elegant suite of rooms in a fashionable district of London. A set of framed certificates confirmed what his stationery indicated: that Everard Thistlethwaite was a certified clinical psychologist. She didn't bother to ask why a wizard had chosen to get Muggle qualifications, instead getting straight to the point by asking him what he thought they had to discuss.

He came out from behind his polished mahogany desk to shake her hand before inviting her to sit in one of a pair of upholstered, rosewood armchairs. "Mr. Snape engaged my services to evaluate his mental stability, including reporting my findings directly to you," he explained, taking the other chair.

Hermione twisted her hands in her lap. The chair was deceptively comfortable, making it difficult to maintain a state of tension, but she managed. "I see. And?"

"And I find him to be in a reasonably sound mental state."

"Only reasonably? So he's not completely sound." Her chin lifted as the beginnings of a triumphant smile softened the tension lines on her face.

"Miss Granger, may I ask how many of your acquaintances who experienced the recent battle you would consider to be *completely* sound? Mr. Snape is as well as could be expected. He is certainly no danger to himself or to others. I understand that is your primary concern, is it not?"

"The primary one," she replied suspiciously.

"Then you agree that there is no reason to continue to monitor his condition?"

"That, Dr. Thistlethwaite," she replied, very carefully pronouncing his name without lisping or otherwise embarrassing herself, "is my decision, not yours. While Mr. Snape may be 'as well as could be expected', I have other concerns beyond his mere survival. He is far too valuable a member of the wizarding community to be allowed to languish in isolation and misery."

"You surprise me." If he was surprised, it didn't show.

Hermione wondered if his bland demeanor and pleasant expression were natural, or if psychology departments offered courses in looking unflappable. If they did, she would consider taking one; it was a very unsettling tactic. "Do I? Did he lead you to expect an ogre? I'm not a cruel woman, whatever he may say."

"Actually, he says very little of you, other than that he wishes you would release him from the terms of the directive. No, I am surprised to discover that you respect him."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Why should you?"

No question *that* tactic was taught in psychology courses. "Dr. Thistlethwaite, I am not your patient, nor am I paying you to assess me," she replied impatiently. "If you want to play games, find another toy. I'm not interested."

The annoyingly serene doctor replied calmly, "Perhaps you would be willing to explain it to me. Mr. Snape is clearly enraged by the situation. Why do you insist on the parole?"

"Because otherwise he would lock himself in his house and never see anyone," she snapped. "You didn't see him before. I may not have professional qualifications, but I know when someone is seriously depressed. He's starting to get better now. It's a really good sign that he engaged you; it's the most proactive thing he's done since the war ended. But he's not recovered yet, not properly. If I abandon him now, he could backslide." She wondered vaguely why she had started caring what the doctor thought. There was nothing he could do to undermine her authority in the situation, but it suddenly seemed terribly important to convince him.

"Even though he resents you for it? You do realise how angry he is."

"It would be difficult to miss."

The doctor sat back and nodded sagely. "I see."

Sage nodding was one of those irritatingly superior behaviors that tended to make her skin crawl. "What? What do you think you see?"

"I see that you have chosen to trade his good opinion of you for his well-being."

At that, Hermione laughed. "His good opinion of me is not on offer, nor is it ever likely to be. His well-being is all I can hope for."

"Perhaps. I'd like you to try something. Go visit him on your own."

"What would be the point? He sees me all the time. He needs to be around different people, to realise that he's not alone. You should have seen what happened with George; he very nearly smiled. When Minerva comes, they reminisce for hours. And when ..."

"Yes, yes." The doctor cut her off. "I'm sure they all do him a world of good. But just now, you are his nemesis. I think you should give him the chance to face you on his own for once."

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It felt very strange to be standing on the doorstep of the house at Spinner's End by herself. It would be the first time she was alone with Severus since he'd stopped staring out of windows and started actually participating in civil conversations. Given the chance to speak to her without an audience, what would he have to say? Would they find anything to talk about besides how much he resented her presence?

From Severus' lack of surprise, she knew that Dr. Thistlethwaite had warned him she might come alone.

"Chinese this time?" he asked, sniffing delicately at the aroma emanating from her bag.

"Pork fried rice, steamed dumplings, crab Rangoon, sesame chicken, hot-and-sour soup, and mushroom chow-mein."

"I'll set the table."

As they ate, she mentioned that her supervisor had received a letter addressed to him as Finch-Felching. In familiar handwriting. Handwriting she'd seen expressing displeasure and disdain in the margins of a hundred corrected Potions essays.

"Handwriting can be disguised," he replied nonchalantly.

She chose to allow him that little canard. For the moment. "It's all over the Ministry now; everyone's laughing at him."

"Have you been blamed for this circumstance?"

"Well, no," she conceded. "But that's not the point."

"Isn't it?"

She thought a moment. "I suppose it is. And thank you."

In the silence that followed, as he failed utterly to acknowledge her thanks, she tried desperately to come up with a topic of conversation. Asking, "Have you read anything interesting lately?" was the best she could manage.

A raised eyebrow did constitute acknowledgement, though it wasn't much of a contribution to the conversation. Without a word, Severus rose from the table and walked out of the kitchen. Hermione was despondently gathering their plates and cutlery, certain that the evening had been a complete failure, when he returned and thrust a parchment at her.

"Read this. Pay particular attention to the section on infusion techniques." He gestured her into the sitting room and took over clearing up the dinner things.

The article described a fascinating new approach to stabilizing potion ingredients. It was very rough, with entire sections that were only sketched out in the vaguest of terms, but Hermione was thrilled to realise that it was in Severus' handwriting.

The next hour was spent in an animated discussion of his theory. Hermione was so caught up in the discussion that she was caught off-guard when the grandfather clock in the front hall chimed ten o'clock.

"I should go."

Severus studied the bookshelf across the room, as if her presence or absence was of no matter to him.

"Before I do, there is something I would like to ask you."

"You've never needed my permission to pry before," he replied in a bored voice.

She chose to ignore the provocation. "Why did you engage Dr. Thistlethwaite? You know that the decision is mine alone."

"I am well aware of that fact. There is no need to rub my face in the power you hold over me." He no longer sounded bored, though his anger was controlled.

"Then why?"

"Because, Miss Granger, it has occurred to me that you might, conceivably, be a person of integrity."

At that moment, she was glad that he was not looking at her. As her initial outrage at the multiple-levels of implied insult faded, she was forced to admire the cleverness of his tactic. "If I ended the parole, would you let me continue to visit?"

She had nearly given up on his ever responding when he asked, "Why?"

Because I worry about you when I'm not with you. Because I think you need me, even if you don't agree. "Because I enjoy your company." That was true too.

At that, his head snapped toward her, his eyes staring intently into hers. They stayed that way long enough that she began counting her breaths, wondering if he would ever break the silence.

"If you do not make a nuisance of yourself. Shall we say ... no more than once a week? Wednesdays, perhaps?"

...

Ordinarily, she made a point of bringing someone else along every second week it wouldn't be fair to Severus to expect him to get by with only her company but this week was special. After months of reading and discussion (with Hermione) and experimentation, and then weeks of writing and editing and rewriting and more discussion (still with Hermione), Severus had submitted his article on potion stabilization to *Ars Alchemica* a few weeks earlier. She had just heard that it had been accepted for publication. This was not a moment she was going to share with anyone.

As had become their habit when it was just the two of them, he cooked.

On her first visit after ending the parole, she had entered the house bearing his favorite curries and headed straight for the kitchen, only to be brought up short by the sight of a platter bearing a perfectly roasted chicken surrounded by potatoes, carrots and parsnips.

"I am capable of providing for my guests," Severus had sneered before taking the bag from her and guiding her to the dining room where the table was set with bone china, elegant crystal and fine linens. A snide comment about the unhealthful nature of greasy takeaways had made her wonder whether he had simply disposed of all the extra food she had so carefully left for him over the previous months.

It had been his suggestion, that long ago evening, that it would be acceptable for her to provide the meal on those occasions when she found it necessary to bring along other guests. Something about not being "obligated to feed the masses". She rather suspected it had more to do with enjoying the occasional korma. If there were other implications, she would not consider them.

To celebrate the occasion of his first post-war publication, she had brought a bottle of wine, and they toasted his accomplishment. As the hour grew late, she reluctantly began to make a move. "I should leave," she said, sitting perfectly still in the second leather armchair, the one that matched his and had mysteriously appeared in his sitting room the week after she'd ended the parole.

"If you wish."

If? Time stopped. "Is there an alternative?"

"Don't be obtuse, Miss Granger. It doesn't suit you."

Time reluctantly ticked on, but only because it had somewhere better to be later. "Less obtuse than disbelieving. The only possible alternative to leaving would be to stay."

"If I recall correctly, you are unreasonably enamoured of possibilities."

Time danced a fandango. "It is still getting late."

"Then you should go to bed."

Time smiled a little smile and left Hermione alone with Severus. "Will you show me where it is?"

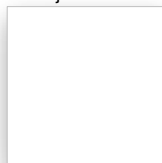
He stood and offered her his hand. As they walked together towards the bedroom, he muttered, "I suppose this means I've missed my chance to hex you into oblivion."

"I suppose it does."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 5

The end of the war should have been a time for happily-ever-afters. For Severus Snape, it was the beginning of the greatest torment of all. He had survived the meddling of a master manipulator and the machinations of a mad megalomaniac, only to find himself subjected to the whims of an annoying know-it-all.



A/N the first: I know I said the story was already complete, but a number of readers pointed out that the ending was somewhat unsatisfactory, and I was forced to agree. This, however, is absolutely, positively, the very last chapter. I mean it this time.

A/N the second: Please note the change to a higher rating - this chapter contains sexual situations. Much thanks to Bambu345 for her exemplary beta work.

Hermione stood in the dark bedroom, unsure what to do next. Severus had dropped her hand to open the door, then stepped into the room after her and closed it behind them. *Should I say something?* she wondered when suddenly she felt his hands on her upper arms. In the dim light, she saw his head lower towards hers and pause for the space of single breath before his mouth was on hers. This was no tentative, gentle brushing of lips. His tongue swept commandingly past her teeth, stroking and tasting her own until she responded in kind. Then his hands were moving over her, pulling her against him, roving up and down her form, stroking and kneading from the top of her head down past her buttocks even as his mouth opened further to let her tongue in as she eagerly met his challenge.

"Clothes," he murmured between kisses, and his hands moved to his own body, opening buttons and discarding garments without ever letting his mouth leave hers.

Hermione unzipped and peeled off her skirt along with her hose, grabbing on to Severus' shoulder to balance herself as she twisted awkwardly to one side to pry off a shoe and pull the clinging material off of her leg, then repeating the move on the other side without ever losing lip contact. By the time she broke the kiss by lifting her jumper over her head, he was completely undressed. Stepping away from her, he laid himself on the bed, his weight propped on one elbow. The shadows completely hid his expression as he watched her remove her undergarments and climb onto the bed next to him.

There were very few words.

"Like this?" he asked.

"A bit harder," she answered.

Assorted yeses from each of them. Yes. Oh yes. Ye-esss. Also moans, whimpers, grunts, and gasps. In other words, the typical assortment of inarticulate noises made by couples too interested in what they are doing to give a frigging damn how they sound.

She wrapped herself around him, twining her legs around his and holding him tightly, as if her life depended on preventing so much as a breath of air finding its way between their bodies. His hands and mouth were greedy and demanding, exploring every inch of her skin, though he kept enough presence of mind to make sure to give her pleasure before finding his own. With one final kiss, more gentle than any they'd shared before, he rolled off of her. Reaching for his wand, he cast a cleaning spell on both of them before pulling the bedcovers over himself and turning to lay half-curved, facing away from her.

Hermione listened as he began to snore. It was a soft snore. Another woman might have been able to fall asleep to the gentle rhythm of that snore, but Hermione wasn't the sort of woman to let either the late hour or post-orgasmic lethargy seduce her into slumber. Not when there were so many questions unanswered.

What had it been? No, that wasn't the right way to think about it. What would it be? That was closer to the mark. Would she look back on this night as something that had simply happened, a celebration of a moment of accomplishment, never to be mentioned again? Or would it change everything, making future encounters between them awkward, until she finally granted him the solitude he seemed to crave? That might even be preferable; having been physically intimate with Severus, it would be torture to go on as they had been, pretending nothing had happened. But, was it possible that Severus intended more? And if so, what? Was he capable of seeing her, or anyone, for that matter, as a true romantic partner, or did he just want additional benefits to go with their ... she supposed she could call it a friendship, but would he?

For one, insane moment she considered waking him and demanding that he explain himself. She groaned inwardly as she imagined his response, not only to being woken, but to being expected to talk about his feelings. No, if she was to have any hope of moving forward from this moment in any sort of graceful manner, she would have to choose a course of action based on her own preferences and her own reading of the situation.

First things first. To stay or to go? Should she spend the night in his bed and face him and whatever consequences there might be in the morning, or should she quietly dress and slip away? If she left, what then? She could wait the full week and appear on his doorstep with takeaway and a friend the following Wednesday, implying that she thought nothing had changed, or she could attempt to initiate an earlier meeting, perhaps invite him to her flat for a change, or ask him to meet her somewhere. She could always come up with a work-related excuse – ask for his expert opinion on some potion-related problem – but he would see right through it. Would he go along with the charade or mock her for lack of Gryffindor courage? Perhaps better to go all out and ask him for a proper date?

There were too many options to sort out all the ramifications in her head; she was going to need to draw up a chart. Right. There were parchment and quills in the sitting room and time was wasting, besides which, she was starting to give herself a headache. Slipping out of bed, she pulled on her knickers and jumper.

Hermione was scanning the shelves of his bathroom medicine cabinet for a headache potion when she saw it. A toothbrush.

"How dare you clutter up my home with your foolish Muggle fripperies! Take them away and indulge your vanity elsewhere." Severus hurled the offending items at Hermione as she stepped in his front door.

It was only the third day of her custodianship, so she took it as a positive sign that he'd actually deigned to speak with her. Well, more like speaking at her. Yelling at her, if she were to be strictly honest.

A cursory examination of the objects in question left her puzzled. "These aren't mine. They're for you. Don't you clean your teeth?"

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I have performed the Tooth Cleaning Charm every day since I was three." The teeth in question were tightly clenched even as he spoke.

"Which explains why they're so yellow. The charm only removes food particles, it doesn't clear away plaque. You need to brush regularly to get them properly clean, and from the looks of things, you're beginning to get gum disease as well. The mouthwash will help with that."

The Battle of the Toothbrush, as it became known to her friends, was the only one she had unequivocally lost. He never once used either toothbrush or mouthwash, and she finally gave up on bringing them into the house, though not before acquiring a few bruises when she couldn't manage to get a blocking spell up in time. Not that it stopped her trying. She left pamphlets on the importance of dental hygiene on his chair, tucked under his pillow, and once even in his ham sandwich. The day he got her in the eye with the sharp corner of the toothpaste tube, she finally conceded defeat.

And yet, there was a toothbrush in his bathroom cabinet. Not just any toothbrush, a red toothbrush. A red toothbrush lying next to a tube of toothpaste. Not one of those dinky little sample tubes, or a travel-sized mini, but a full-sized Aquafresh Fresh & Minty, enough toothpaste to brush three times a day for months.

She closed the cabinet, went back to the bedroom, slipped off her knickers and jumper, climbed into bed, and fell asleep. Smiling.