

The Rumor

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Severus Snape never paid attention to rumors, until one day he found he couldn't help himself. *One Shot, AU since HBP*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: Hello all. *waves* Thank you so much for taking a moment to read this little piece I came up with in the midst of trying my hardest to write a fic that isn't, *gasp*, a one-shot. Any and all feedback will be highly, highly, *highly* appreciated, honored, and hung up on my wall to be idolized. :) Thanks so much in advance!

Many, many, many thanks to my beta, Nadya, who put up with my emails in the midst of her busy life and took the time to read this piece (and others) and help me make it better. I owe her big-- a first born child perhaps (or, at least, a LOT of chocolate). Any and all remaining mistakes, however, are mine and mine alone.

And, as a complete side note, my other fic, *The Letter* is nominated at the Multifaceted Awards under "Pride: Best Fluff". Of course, you are under no obligation to vote for me. I just thought I'd mention it. :)

Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just like to play.

It began with a rumor.

That fact alone wasn't enough to spur anyone's notice, as hearty gossip and salacious rumors were, apparently, the only way news traveled around Hogwarts. It was hardly out of the ordinary for a single person walking down the main corridor on the first floor to find themselves the accidental recipient of the latest news regarding Vincent Merriweather's love life and Violet Hemming's latest charm to "improve" her appearance.

What *was* out of the ordinary was the fact that the gossip called the attention of one Severus Snape.

Now, for the record, Severus *never* paid attention to rumors. Being a man of little patience for frivolities, he'd never desired to hear of the hormone-infused drama that seemed to run rampant amongst his students. He paid little attention to the whispers in the halls and chatting after class. He couldn't be bothered enough to care about the comings and goings of his students and their incessant need to tell every detail of their comparatively innocent and tame lives to the entire world. It was a useless manner in which to pass the time, and Severus had much more important things to do.

His intense dislike for the habits of his more loquacious students, combined with the fact that he *had* have more important things to do, was precisely the reason even the likes of Severus himself couldn't understand his behavior for those few weeks in late May.

It was nearly the midnight hour when Severus, plagued by insomnia, decided to take his usual bout around the castle. In characteristic foul humor, he was bound and determined to catch wayward Gryffindors wandering about the castle in their usual arrogant manner. With nearly maniacal glee, Severus began his search of the castle along his customary route. He made sure to search the kitchens, the Great Hall, the classrooms, the library, behind the suits of armor (who apparently highly resented the disturbance), and even the Owlery.

He'd been searching the castle for well over an hour, and it appeared, by that point, that Hogwarts was having a truly rare and possibly divinely influenced evening of obedience and acquiescence to the rules of conduct.

Highly unlikely.

The fruits of his labor, however, were waiting at the top of the Astronomy Tower. As he passed the foot of the staircase of the West Tower, Severus caught the sound of a scant whisper drifting ever softly down the winding stairwell.

He froze. A dark smirk tugged at his lips. He turned, slowly, toward the staircase and silently stepped up the first steps.

Years as a spy had taught him a thing or two about moving amongst the darkness, silent and unnoticed. Without making a single sound, Severus climbed the twisting stone stairs, dodging the moonlight slipping through small windows. He grinned. He was almost there.

He had almost reached the top of the staircase when he paused, staying just beyond the reach of the soft light spilling out from underneath the door at the top of the staircase. He stretched his fingers and reached for his wand, ready to throw open the door in a moment's time. He could already feel the pride surging in his veins, knowing that his little contribution this evening might secure Slytherin house as the winner of the House Cup.

The best detentions, he had come to decide, were the ones given under the shock of surprise.

It was then, however, that the voices spoke louder and Severus, for the first time, could understand what they were saying.

"Professor Granger is getting *married*?"

Severus froze, his wand held tightly in his hand and his dark smirk instantly fading away.

"Shhh! Do you want to get us caught?"

"Well no, obviously, but are you *sure*? I mean, I haven't heard anything like that."

"I heard it straight from Eleanor Mockridge, who said she overheard Professor Granger and Professor McGonagall discussing *wedding plans*!"

Severus just then realized that it had been at least a minute since he'd last taken a breath and things were beginning to look a bit spotty. He quickly remedied the problem and stepped closer to the door, risking discovery by blocking the streams of light spilling down the top stairs.

"And you'll never guess to *whom*! She's marrying *Harry Potter*!"

"*Harry Potter? The Boy-Who-Lived? You're joking!*"

"I'm not joking! Eleanor said she'd heard Professor Granger herself make mention of what a handsome groom Harry Potter would make!"

For reasons still unknown, Severus suddenly found himself uncomfortably curling his fingertips into the crevices between the stones lining the walls. Irritation had unexpectedly flooded his veins and his jaw popped with the pressure of grinding teeth. His heart pounded furiously, much in the same way it would, were its owner faced with a challenge of a duel.

Why he was irritated, exactly, was anyone's guess. It didn't much matter at the moment, in any case, as Severus found himself fully able to remedy himself of it (or rather, he found a suitable target). Unfortunately, the remedy came in the form of the two girls who had taken the midnight walk to the Astronomy Tower and had decided, in a moment of horrible timing, to open the door.

Needless to say, fifty outrageous points were taken from Gryffindor and Abigail Cummings and Bridget Aldridge found themselves serving detention for a long, long time.

For the next few days, Severus didn't dare address the questions lingering in the back of his mind. Those inopportune, inconvenient, forcibly dismissible questions that prodded him, asking him repeatedly why he'd allowed the likes of a small rumor to bother him so. He still didn't know and had no idea of when he would know. What he did have, however, was a somewhat worrisome fixation on what he'd heard and the fact that it *did not* matter in the slightest.

The entire matter was hardly convenient, as he found himself spending the greater part of those few days, after he'd heard the rumor, making potions. Unfortunately for Severus and his patience, he suddenly took twice the expected amount of time to prepare said potions. It appeared that the Potions Master was suddenly unable to concoct the simplest of brews without cocking it up at least once.

The consequences of the rumor were also rather inappropriately distracting. He found himself the victim of a sudden inability to concentrate in the slightest. The weekly staff meeting (which, he noted approximately fifteen times, Hermione had *not* attended) became a rather embarrassing public display of his apparent disorder, as Dumbledore had asked him on three separate occasions if he was quite alright. It took a menacing glare and a subtle threat of a wand to keep Madam Pomfrey from fussing over him.

In addition, it was rather disgusting, all in all. Severus, the man who had formerly looked upon any sort of rumor or gossip with violent revulsion, found himself resorting to listening to the conversations of his coworkers with a sense of rather disturbing interest. He could hardly base the assumption that Hermione was marrying Harry Potter off the gossip of two thirteen year old girls, and desperate times called for desperate measures. It was in this manner that Severus found out about Professor Sinistra's ongoing affair with a bartender working in Hogsmeade, Professor Sprout's strange nighttime habits, and Professor Flitwick's rather worrisome obsession with spoons. And while he did manage to hear some talk of weddings with the mention of both Hermione and Potter's respective names, he had yet to find out the details he so desired.

Least of all, the entire matter was hardly *sane*. The fact that he'd had to remind himself that this was not Professor Granger, the Arithmancy mistress, but rather *Hermione* Granger, the insufferable-know-it-all, that was at the center of the rumor was a sign that he was in failing mental health, indeed. It was hardly appropriate or *normal* to continue his rather questionable obsession over it.

And while all the consequences were satisfactory reasons as to why Severus should abandon all manner of thought pertaining to Hermione Granger and that rumor, he still found himself unable to let it go.

Perhaps, he reasoned, it dealt with the fact that Hermione, while infuriating and notoriously stubborn when it came to defending her precious Gryffindors against him and his somewhat biased system for point deductions, was a strikingly intelligent woman, filled with ambition and possibility. In the years since her arrival at Hogwarts as a member of the staff, she'd made it her personal mission to become friends with Severus, and after approximately five years, she'd managed to succeed. She was one of the few members of the staff with whom he could have a decent conversation. Hermione wasn't outrageous or extravagant; she enjoyed research, books, and quiet evenings in front of the fire. She was an intellectual, and, despite her decidedly Gryffindor traits, she was rather a pleasant person (most of the time).

It was for that reason, Severus finally decided, that he couldn't possibly understand what would inspire the likes of Hermione Granger to marry Harry Potter, of all people.

Severus knew Potter to be loud, boisterous, and arrogant, thanks to his fame for saving the whole of wizarding world (which really wasn't such a grand feat after all, Severus noted bitterly, and it wasn't as though it had never been done before).

Harry Potter, in Severus's opinion, was the *last* person whom Hermione should marry (well, just after that Weasley boy, of course). He simply couldn't fathom that the Insufferable-Know-It-All would marry the Boy-Who-Bloody-Lived-Again and they would go on to have their many hyphenated children. It just wasn't... reasonable.

While the processes of thought turned in Severus's head for those few days after his hearing the rumor, the rest of the staff couldn't help but notice a change in the surly Potion Master's behavior. The usually sharp eyed and tongued Severus was surprisingly slow and rather distracted. He hardly touched any of his food during meals, and, as Filius Flitwick couldn't help but notice, he would cast furtive glances in the general direction of the other end of the Head Table, where the Arithmancy professor sat, talking animatedly with the Deputy Headmistress.

To tell the complete truth, it was a horrible few days. Severus hardly got a single thing done and by the time a week had passed, he was furious with himself for having let so much time go by before getting over his temporary madness. So, in a fit of irritation, Severus found himself pounding on the door to Hermione's private quarters. The painting guarding the entrance to her rooms sniffed haughtily, clearly unhappy with the obvious disrespect done to the frame. Severus, as expected, couldn't be bothered enough to care.

"Yes?" Hermione peeked her head out from behind the portrait. "Oh! Severus! Please come in!"

Severus begrudgingly stepped over the threshold and into her quarters. While it wasn't his first visit, he still found himself rather struck by the warm oak furnishings and the neutral tones of the room. He'd half expected a portrait of Godric Gryffindor himself hanging over her fireplace. Instead, a single vase with a handful of wildflowers sat on the mantel, along with two or three picture frames of her family, friends, and that bloody Potter.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, holding up a teacup. Severus grunted and gave what he assumed was a nod before settling into one of the two armchairs facing the fire.

"Here you are," she said, gently handing him a cup. "Do be careful, though, it's hot," she warned before settling into her own armchair. "So how are you, Severus?" She smiled warmly.

"As well as one can imagine," said Severus, taking a sip of the tea. He immediately burned his tongue and regretted not heeding her warning.

"Yes, well, with the end of term approaching, the students seem to have taken their mental holiday a bit early." She smirked wryly and waved a wand at her teacup, instantly cooling it. Severus sniffed resentfully. "So how is your research coming? Any progress?"

Severus placed his teacup back on its saucer, letting it clang a little in the process. "I'm afraid I haven't had much time to run experiments this week," he said, letting his eyes focus on the loose tea grains swirling at the bottom of his cup.

"Oh! That reminds me!" said Hermione, suddenly bursting out of her chair and rushing across the room to one of the three bookshelves lining the walls. Packed full with the multicolored spines, Severus assumed there had to be *some* mode of organization to them, else she'd never find what she was looking for.

"Aha!" she cried, tugging a thick tome of the shelf. "I found this in the library yesterday, and I thought it might do well for your research."

Severus took the book from her open hands; *Environmental Variants on the Efficacy of Potion Making* by Thelonious Brewer. While Severus's research focused specifically on temperature gradients in relation to the effectiveness of potions using belladonna as a base, he knew that the book would come in handy and he was rather ashamed he hadn't found it himself.

Severus looked up at her, unable to hide the small smile that dared to tug at the corner of his lips. "I believe this will be of some help. Thank you."

Hermione's grin grew and she settled back into her chair. "You're most welcome." She took a sip of her tea, keeping her eyes focused on him over the edge of her teacup. Severus felt an odd sort of tingling in his stomach.

"So, if I may ask, what brings you here this afternoon, Severus," said Hermione matter-of-factly.

Severus cleared his throat and placed his teacup and saucer on the table. He shifted uncomfortably. A lump slowly settled into his throat and, for a moment, he couldn't speak. Well, couldn't speak and wouldn't speak were two different things entirely: he probably could speak, if he knew what to say.

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Severus? Are you alright? You look a bit peakish."

Severus cursed under his breath. Being questioned for state of health wasn't exactly the way he'd planned on starting his subtle suggestion to her that she'd be better off marrying an Erumpent than that ruddy Potter.

"I'm fine," said Severus, tugging at the sleeves of his customary black robes. "I simply had a matter I was planning on discussing with you."

Hermione's brows furrowed and she placed her teacup on the table beside his. "This sounds important."

"It is," said Severus, nodding solemnly.

But before Hermione had a chance to discover just how important it really was, the fireplace beside them gave a muffled swish and suddenly standing before them, in flesh and bone and far too many ashes, was the ruddy Boy Wonder himself...Harry Potter.

"Harry!" shrieked Hermione, clutching at her chest. It was probably a good thing she'd put the teacup down. "What are you doing here?" she cried.

"Well that's a fine way to greet me," said Harry, sourly dusting the soot off his robes and, Severus couldn't help but notice, onto Hermione's floor.

"But you said you were going to Russia!" she cried, eyeing the falling ashes.

"Yes, well it seems they got the issue under control and don't need the likes of an Auror showing up unnecessarily. So I stopped by to visit Dumbledore, and I thought I'd floo in," said Harry, wiping the smudges off his glasses and sliding them back on his nose. "Anyway, I thought we could...oy! What is *he* doing here?"

Severus was thinking very much the same thing.

"*He* is Severus and *he* is having tea with me," said Hermione haughtily. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like you're sitting in the same room as the Greasy Git of Hogwarts," said Harry, eyeing Severus dangerously. Severus's eyebrows rose. He was hardly intimidated; he was just as proficient at dueling spells as he was.

"Honestly Harry, stop being so childish!" Hermione cried, jumping to her feet and placing her hands on her hips. "You're the one who showed up unannounced."

Harry had the decency to look at least the slightest bit ashamed. "I'm sorry, Mione, but I was just so excited to have the time off and I wanted to come see you."

Hermione's glare softened ever so slightly. "Well, I suppose *wedo* have plans to discuss."

Harry's expression brightened. "Brilliant." He looked expectantly at Severus, as though waiting for him to leave.

Severus, naturally, did no such thing.

Hermione settled back into her chair and summoned an additional seat. "Sit down, then, Harry, and join us for some tea."

"Join you?" asked Harry, unable to mask the tone of incredulity in his voice.

"Yes," said Hermione tersely. "Join Severus and I for a spot of tea."

Harry hovered, as though at a loss for what to do or say. He certainly didn't want to sit and be forced into polite conversation with Severus Snape (if there was such a thing), but he had no intention on backing out.

"Fine," said Harry, sinking into the available chair and taking the cup of tea Hermione handed him.

"So," said Hermione, facing Severus. "Where were we?"

"I believe I was about to leave," said Severus, moving to stand up.

Hermione jumped to her feet. The corners of her mouth tugged at a frown, and for some reason, Severus found himself inexplicably pleased by her reluctance to have him leave. "Already? But we..."

"Well, I suppose we won't be needing the other chair anymore," said Harry, dissolving the chair that Severus had been sitting in, as though not to let him entertain any ideas of staying. Severus's hands itched to throttle the Boy Wonder's throat.

"Harry!" Hermione hissed. When she looked back around, Severus was already approaching the door. Hermione rushed after him and, upon reaching him, grabbed his hand.

The touch, surprisingly enough, wasn't as unwelcome as it was unexpected. Her hand was warm and soft, and Severus found that he rather liked the sensation of her skin against his. The only thing he could bother to think at that moment was how appropriate the action was, considering the presence of her fiancé only steps away. But, being that the fiancé in question was Potter, he hardly cared.

"But you said...but we were going to discuss that... *that thing*," said Hermione, staring up at him urgently.

"I'm sure there will be another moment for our discussion," said Severus, his breath inexplicably catching in his chest as he met her eyes. "Unfortunately, the company of another individual makes this a rather inopportune moment."

Hermione's eyes fell and she released his hand. Severus immediately felt the loss. "Well, alright then. But I expect us to have that conversation," she said, wagging a finger playfully at him. "I must say, you've left me quite curious."

Severus nodded shortly. "Until another time, then," he said. With that, he stepped out the portrait hole and left Hermione to her questionable fiancé.

The appropriate moment for the discussion came later that evening without Severus's prior knowledge or consent. It came when Hermione, in a fit of unresolved curiosity, appeared at the door to his quarters, cheerfully suggesting that they continue the conversation from earlier.

Severus was quite undone. He had hoped that an evening in front of the fire with a glass of bourbon would be enough to bubble the words to the surface that he'd been lacking before. With the glass of bourbon sitting on the table, only half finished, he had yet to reach that point.

Nonetheless, Hermione burst in, summoned a second chair for herself and settled across from Severus in front of the fire. Severus remained by the door, his sweaty hand gripping the doorknob. From her seat, Hermione grinned genially at him. "All right there, Severus?" she asked.

At that moment, Severus rather hated her. She was going to make this as difficult as possible.

With a steadying breath, Severus moved toward the sitting area and stopped in front of the fire. He leaned a heavy arm against the black mantle and paused for a moment, simply searching for words.

"So," said Hermione, watching him with interest. "We were going to discuss that important issue you mentioned."

"Yes," said Severus hollowly. "Yes."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Is there something wrong?"

Severus slowly nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid there is."

The crease in Hermione's forehead grew and she frowned concernedly. "Was it something I did?"

Severus took a deep breath. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Oh dear," said Hermione in a small voice.

Then, as though empowered by an invisible wind, divine force or, perhaps, a good swig of bourbon, he began.

"I realize that perhaps it is a commonly accepted tradition that men and women get married--- no, no that's not it." Severus began to pace in front of the fire, muttering indistinctly to himself.

"I'm sorry," began Hermione, her expression utterly puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't-"

"There are classes of people, Miss Granger, that, whether they realize it or not, are..." Severus paused, mid thought and shook his head again. "No..."

"Severus?" asked Hermione slowly, eyeing him rather warily.

"As difficult as it may be for me to admit this, Miss Granger," said Severus. "Your effort to improve yourself in my eyes has not gone unnoticed and, while I wonder at your mental health and motivations for doing so, I have come to think of you as... as an equal."

"As a friend," Hermione corrected, and Severus made a noncommittal sound.

"In any case, as a coworker and acquaintance, I feel it my duty to warn you of the dangerous choice you've made in the way of a companion."

Hermione's eyebrows rose and she looked as though she'd swallowed her tongue.

"While I am in no position to judge your choice of Potter as a husband, I feel it my duty to warn you that, after a given period of time married to him, you are likely to regret

it."

"I-I beg your pardon?" Hermione managed.

Severus's pacing grew faster.

"I feel that a person of your intelligence and disposition could hardly do well married to a person of such public notoriety as the Boy-Who-Lived." Severus could feel blood pounding in his veins and he was sure that if bloody Harry Potter made the mistake of again showing up unannounced, he might just hurt him. "From my knowledge of you and your temperament, I feel that you would do better married to a person of respect and intelligence; someone with whom you could discuss your research projects without any need of intelligence brews to help him understand. I feel that you would be rather reasonably matched with someone who shares your penchant for quiet evenings and who accepts your somewhat irrational affinity to House Elves, that thing you call a cat, mint humbugs, hot chocolate, rainy evenings, and to books of all manner of size, shape, and subject. I feel you should marry someone who is your match in every manner possible."

Severus stopped pacing and turned to face Hermione, his hands folded behind his back.

"In short, Miss Granger, I do not feel that it would be in your best interest to marry Harry Potter. It would be... unacceptable."

Hermione stared.

The grandfather clock in the corner ticked. The pounding in Severus's ears grew louder. Hermione didn't move.

Severus shifted. "Well?"

Hermione swallowed thickly and, if Severus wasn't imagining things, he swore he could see a glistening of tears in her eyes.

"I'm not marrying Harry," she said softly.

Severus shifted again. "Well, I'm certainly pleased that you would accept my advice so quickly."

"No," said Hermione, slowly standing up and never tearing her eyes from his. "I'm not marrying Harry because I was never engaged to him in the first place."

Severus started, and then stopped. His brows furrowed and he stared blankly at Hermione. "I've heard talk of a wedding, and..."

"There's a wedding, yes. Harry's wedding, in fact," said Hermione, nodding slowly. "But he's marrying *Ginny Weasley*, not me. I've simply been helping them plan it."

Severus stared. The implications of every single word she'd said hit him like a two ton brick, leaving Severus feeling, in the simplest of terms, more or less an ass.

Hermione took a step toward him and gently slid her hand into his. "Do you realize you were describing yourself?"

Severus took in a shuddered breath, too distracted by her proximity and the sensation of her hand in his. He cleared his throat. "That was not my intention," he managed.

"All the same," said Hermione, stepping closer until she was just a breath away. "I could never marry a man like Harry Potter when there's a man like Severus Snape."

His breath hitched. Suddenly, the world had come crashing down around him. Suddenly, nothing at all made sense. Suddenly, Hermione pressed her lips against his, and suddenly everything was right.

Months later, when Vincent Merriweather's stories of love conquests had gone stale and the sad story of Violet Hemming's beauty charms and the horrible manner in which they had interacted had been told time and time again, there was yet another rumor floating around the castle; this one involving the story of two professors and an upcoming wedding.

Severus Snape, for the first time in his life, found great pleasure in the circulating rumor, which, he was pleased to inform chattering students as he assigned detention, really wasn't a rumor at all.