

Ave Maria

by kizzy7

Hermione is alone in Hogsmeade on Christmas Eve.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: As a disclaimer, I do not own either Hermione or Severus. This is a response to the 'Hogsmeade Encounter' category. I must thank my lovely betas, mgm86 and reets67, and the admins at TPP. Happy Holidays to all!

Hermione closed the door with an added emphasis; a sharp gust of wind inched its way through the doorway, causing her tightly wrapped scarf to flutter against her cheek.

"Morning, dear," Rosmerta said happily, a large smile upon her face. "Happy Christmas."

Hermione pulled off her Gryffindor-red mittens one at a time. "Happy Christmas, Rosmerta," she replied, rather more tersely than intended.

"Meeting your husband here?" Rosmerta asked as she rubbed her hands together briskly.

Hermione stared resolutely at the floor, following the crisscrossed pattern of cracks in the wood. "Um, no. He's... out."

"Right," the older woman replied, her cheeks tinged pink. "What'll you have?"

"Oh. Hot cocoa, please."

Hermione took the proffered steaming mug from Rosmerta's hands and determinedly studied the marshmallows floating on the top, ignoring the plaintive look of concern in Rosmerta's eyes. She settled into a corner booth and loosened her scarf.

With a sigh, she looked out the window at the slowly falling snow. She touched the glass, tracing patterns in the gathered condensation.

How had it come to this? How had *she* come to this?

At first, Hermione's suspicions had manifested themselves like the icy, bitter chill of winter, as if a snowstorm had swirled in her stomach and had slowly trickled throughout her entire body, causing the tips of her fingers to numb and the warmth of her heart to freeze. A blinding, cold, and lonely feeling, and she hadn't liked it.

Soon, however, the feelings had mutated into a wild, uncontrollable panic of sorts, and still, two long months later, she did not know what to do.

Hermione Granger was almost convinced that her husband of seven years...seven long, exhausting, argumentative *wonderful* years...was having an affair.

When she had married Severus Snape, eyebrows had raised, tongues had wagged, and concerns had most definitely been voiced. But Hermione had been young and headstrong; she had smiled and walked down the aisle into the dark arms of her erstwhile Potions professor as if he had been the only man in the world.

He still was the only man in the world, as far as she was concerned. She saw the humour behind his cutting remarks; she saw the man behind the Death Eater; she saw love and a future behind the emptiness of a heart that still belonged to Lily Evans. She loved him to the point of obsession.

Even now, Hermione knew that he hadn't loved her when he had taken her hand and vowed to be her husband, faithfully and 'til death do us part. She knew that he hadn't loved her when he had made love to her for the first time, that night in the dungeons on the cold stone floor. But Hermione Granger was a Gryffindor through and through, and so she had fought against all hope for what she wanted. She had received it in the end, or so she had believed.

Severus wasn't an easy man to love. He made life so much more difficult than it need be, and sometimes *sometimes*...Hermione imagined what it would have been like to marry easy-going, openhearted Ron. She shook her head, curling her fingers around the mug of hot cocoa.

She had made her choice all those years ago, marrying a man who had only agreed because she had saved his life, and he had felt somehow indebted to her. At the time, she had thought that her love would be enough for the both of them, at least until she managed to take that place in his heart that the undeserved Lily Evans had clung to for so long.

"And he did love me," she muttered unconvincingly to herself, fighting against the tears she felt prickling against the back of her eyelids. "I know he did."

She tightened her scarf around her neck, shivering slightly in the early morning cold of Christmas Eve.

"Anything else, dearie?" Rosmerta asked as she wiped the front counter with a spotted blue rag.

"Oh. No, thank you," Hermione answered, a fake smile plastered to her face, and she realised that it hurt to smile, now.

"You let me know," Rosmerta replied.

Hermione shivered again. "Thank you."

She savoured the last of her cocoa, reluctant to leave the Three Broomsticks. She had nowhere to go but the empty dungeons of Hogwarts.

Severus had not come home last night, and he had owed her in the morning with a vague excuse and ambiguous promises of his eventual return. It was as if he wasn't even trying to hide his unfaithfulness anymore. As if he had discarded her like a used pair of Quidditch gloves.

Hermione blinked rapidly and sighed.

I should just leave, she thought viciously. Pack up my bags and leave before he even gets back

The bells above the door to the Three Broomsticks tinkled, announcing the arrival of another lonely Christmas patron.

Hermione shivered at the incoming gust of air and slid down lower in her seat. Her eyes darted quickly towards the door.

Her heart literally skipped. She gasped, wondering if she was having a heart attack.

She watched her husband guide a young, redheaded woman into an adjoining booth. He said something, and she laughed. Hermione noticed her eyes...her beautiful, emerald-green eyes...sparkled when she looked at him. Severus. *Her* husband.

Lily. In the end, she was thrown off for some shallow Lily imposter. How ironic.

It was as if their wedding vows, their life together, and their future all meant naught when compared to the undying poisonous presence of Lily Evans.

Hermione swallowed heavily at the thick feeling in the back of her throat and clutched her mug tightly. She huddled into the corner of her booth, staring balefully at the glowing couple. Rosmerta was handing them steaming drinks, shooting furtive glances towards Hermione.

Hermione felt... cold, as if a Dementor had just stepped in for a quick Butterbeer.

"...she'll be surprised, I'm hoping..." came her husband's voice, deep and unmistakable in its gravity.

Quite the understatement, husband mine, Hermione thought fiercely.

The redhead smiled beatifically and gestured at a handful of papers on the table. Severus took out a long, elegant quill and bent over the table.

Hermione felt her chest constrict. *What* was he signing? *What* was he doing with that woman on Christmas Eve, when he should be home with his wife, arguing over Christmas decorations and brightly wrapped gifts and all those bloody carol singers and the ridiculous amounts of cookies Dobby tried to force on him and...

She sniffed. No more. That was not her life anymore.

When Hermione saw the trollop lightly place her perfectly manicured hand possessively atop Severus' forearm, something snapped. She let out a low sound and forcefully threw her empty mug across the tabletop. It skittered and clattered noisily to the floor, spilling little tear-like beads of chocolate in its wake.

Everyone in the restaurant...Rosmerta, poised with a cleaning cloth over the counter; the tall, gangly hired help named Karl; the collection of elderly wizards reminiscing on the bar stools over shots of Firewhisky at nine in the morning; her faithless, stubborn, wonderful husband and his Lily lookalike...gaped at her.

Hermione found that she didn't care.

She could feel magic gathering around her, waiting, static, like moments before lightening strikes.

"Severus Snape!" she yelled, her voice much too thin and reedy for her liking. She stood from the booth and grabbed her purse, a somewhat gaudy Gryffindor red and white patterned bag that Severus had given her for her birthday two years ago. She clutched the cloth handle of the bag and faltered. Tears blurred her gaze, and for half a horrific second, Hermione thought that she would faint.

"Hermione?" came her husband's voice, and she felt his touch, light at the elbow to steady her.

She blinked rapidly, and her vision cleared. She saw his face...his overlarge, hawkish nose; his defined, angular cheekbones; his long, lanky hair; and his dark, dark eyes, narrowed. Hermione glanced toward the redhead. Her chin was rested in her hands, her perfect mouth puckered with concern.

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Rosmerta cut in, her voice sharp. "He *deserves* this!"

Hermione stepped away from Severus.

"You!" she cried, blinking again, willing back the tears. "I... I can't *believe* you, Severus! I thought... I thought that you loved me."

He opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione cut him off.

"No. No. You don't get to say anything. Listen," she said, and her voice lowered. "Remember our wedding night? You told me, 'I don't love you, Miss Granger. But I respect you, and I promise to spend the rest of my life pr...proving that.' Remember?" she asked, stuttering.

Severus nodded, his eyes glittering.

Hermione continued. "I knew I could live with that. Your respect, if not your love.*She* proves that I have... neither," she cried, gesturing to the redhead still sitting at the booth. She could hear the tears wavering in her voice. "I have nothing. You have left me with nothing." She could feel her tears, once again trailing down her cheeks and gathering in the hollow of her throat. She wiped her eyes and attempted to smile.

"Happy Christmas, Severus," she said in a shaky whisper. "I'll be gone when you get back."

With a curt nod, Hermione walked away from him and opened the door.

The snow crunched beneath her feet, and the wind bit through her clothes and whipped her hair around her face. She let out an unsteady breath and again wiped at the tears freezing on her cheeks.

"Hermione," Severus said softly.

She turned around to face her husband.

"Please, Severus. Just let me go."

He shivered in the cold, Christmas air. "You foolish, foolish woman."

He glared at her and crossed the distance between them in two purposeful strides. He grabbed her forcefully by the shoulders.

"Foolish woman," he gently said once again, his lips curled into a small smile. He leaned down and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"Before you throw me out, wife, I have something to show you," he whispered whilst nuzzling at her cheek with his nose.

"Severus..." Hermione whispered. "I can't."

"Come with me, Hermione. Please."

His voice, so dangerously sincere, persuaded her, and she nodded before she could really even think.

Hermione felt the unpleasant tug of Side-Along Apparition, and when she next opened her eyes, she was staring at a small cottage. She blinked. It was as if she was looking at a picture from a storybook...frosted windowpanes, a thatched roof, several ivy-covered trellises, and a welcoming slow curl of steam rising sinuously from the chimney.

"Severus!" she gasped, so surprised she didn't even know what to think. "Where are we?"

He chuckled. "The outskirts of Hogsmeade, Hermione. And this is your...*our*...new home. If you'll still have me, that is."

"Wh...what?!" she sputtered, her heart racing.

"You've been nagging me for a house for two bloody years, Hermione. There is only so much a man can take," he said, smirking as he put his arms around her and placed a kiss atop her head.

Hermione felt dizzy. "But... you... affair... I don't understand!" she said crossly.

"Hermione," he said seriously as he cupped her chin and forced her to look at him. "I love you."

Hermione stepped away from him. "You don't, though. You love Lily."

"Lily!" he said with a laugh as he stepped closer to her and placed his hands on her waist, gently rubbing circles through her cloak. "Contrary to popular belief, my dear, I am not *that* pathetic. No. I love you, and I have for years. Ever since that night you stormed into the Potions lab and told me...rather harshly, I might add...that you were going to *make* me love you." He laughed and touched her face, trailing the path of her cheekbone with the tip of his finger.

"How could I refuse?" he asked, leaning forward to place a soft kiss upon her lips.

"But... but what about the trollop?" Hermione demanded, her eyes slewed angrily.

"Oh. You mean Charlotte?"

"Charlotte!" Hermione exclaimed, and then she snorted inelegantly. "How appropriate. Rhymes with 'harlot,'" she spat.

"Ah, lovely, jealous wife of mine," Severus said with a self-righteous smirk.

Hermione glared at him, her arms crossed. "Well?" she said impatiently, tapping her foot on the sidewalk.

"Well, as to her private life, I really have no idea. She's my real estate agent, Hermione. She helped me find this house," he said, gesturing towards the cottage. "I was signing the final papers this morning, you foolish, foolish woman."

Hermione felt something located roughly beneath her heart loosen and expand. "Really?" she said, grinning.

"Really," he assured her. "It's your Christmas present, Hermione."

"But... you didn't come home last night, Severus. Where were you?"

He smiled a full, real smile that Hermione had only seen a few times in her many years of knowing him.

"I'll show you what I was doing," he whispered gently into her ear, and he grabbed her hand and led her into the cottage.

Hermione gasped.

A fire crackled merrily in the grate, flames dancing in the cold morning light. Two red stockings hung above the mantle, loaded heavily with small gifts. A tree, gaily adorned with lights and ornaments, sparkled in front of the window. Festive music played quietly in the background, and Hermione recognized the ethereal bel canto soprano and the soft piano accompaniment as 'Ave Maria.' It was her favorite Christmas song.

A picture hung on the wall above the fireplace, and Hermione walked closer to touch it, tracing the dark brown frame thoughtfully. It read, 'Our First Christmas,' the words emblazoned in golden letters across the bottom panel. The picture showed Severus, dressed in a tuxedo and a dark red bowtie, scowling heavily with his arm thrown reluctantly around a glowing Hermione, resplendent in a matching crimson dress.

"Severus," Hermione said quietly. "How... where did you get this picture?"

Her husband grimaced. "I had to track down that insufferable Potter boy."

Hermione blinked. "You actually talked to Harry?"

"So it would seem. This... this doesn't mean that I actually like him! Or the Weasley prat!" Severus sputtered.

Hermione turned to face him, her eyes misty.

"I love you, Severus."

He nodded and leaned down to kiss her fully on the mouth.

"And I love you," he whispered into her ear.

They danced, swaying slowly to the Christmas melody in their new home.

"Come," Severus murmured into Hermione's ear. "I'll show you the bedroom."

A/N: Personally, I think that 'Charlotte' is a lovely name. You'll have to forgive Hermione for her rash statement.