

Blood, Sex, Love, Magic

by neelix

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Nature or Nurture?

Chapter 1 of 14

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The alley was cold and dark. Even the dull orange glow from the street light did nothing to take the chill out of the air. Snow was starting to fall in light flakes, landing on the dark slate roofs and dusting the cobbled London streets like icing sugar.

Severus Snape was in no mood to take in the Dickensian scene about him. He had his business to conclude and no time to waste doing it. He walked slowly to the darker end of the narrow alley, grateful for the shadows that the surrounding buildings afforded him. The Muggle woman held his hand tightly, and the clip, clip of her heels reverberated and echoed along the street, the only sign they were there at all.

'You don't waste any time,' she murmured lightly, her voice husky. Her perfume hung about her, sweet and cloying. Snape turned his head to avoid the stench of it.

'Indeed,' he replied softly. The woman shuddered, and Snape curled his lip in wry amusement.

They reached the end of the alley, and Snape turned, backing the woman against the wall and staring deeply into her eyes. The woman gasped as he bent his face to hers, his long, black hair caressing her pale cheek. A ghost of a breath left her as he cast a silent Stupefy, and his mouth drifted past her lips and down to the pulse in her throat.

Her blood was like ambrosia. Warm and sweet, he drank not like a thirsty man, but as one who was starved. He felt the life-force in his veins and the lightness of nourishment as it flooded his body from head to toe. But he was not greedy. And contrary to popular belief, he was not a killer. Not on these occasions, anyway. Perhaps in extreme circumstances...

His lifted his head from the slim, pale flesh and sighed with contentment. Sliding his hand to the puncture wounds, he healed the woman and cast Obliviate before removing the Stunning Spell. Bending his lips to hers, he kissed her deeply. The woman moaned into his mouth and he pulled away, his teeth flashing slightly in the half light as he grinned at her.

'My thanks,' he whispered.

In the blink of an eye he was gone, and the woman stumbled from the wall, turning to see where he had disappeared to.

High above, Disillusioned against the snow-filled sky, Snape laughed quietly to himself before flying in the direction of his nearest Apparition point.

He arrived at the gates of Hogwarts a little after midnight and walked quickly towards the looming shadow of the castle. The snow had not yet travelled north, and the moon was bright. He cut a striking figure as he walked with his head held high, robes billowing as he strode with vigour and purpose. Life was different now. No more skulking in the dark or pretending to serve one master or another. He was his own man, albeit a discreet one.

From the window of the Astronomy Tower, a witch watched him as the moon highlighted his dark form. The sound of a jackdaw rent the air, causing the witch to shiver and return to her bed.

Severus Snape paused and watched as Hermione Granger disappeared from his view.

Once in the dungeon, Snape discarded his outer coat and hung it smoothly on the wrought-iron coat rack by the door. Slipping his hand inside his pocket, he withdrew a dead mouse and then whistled sharply. The sound of wings was followed by a large, black bird that appeared from an adjoining room. Landing firmly on the top of a ladder-backed wooden chair, the bird cawed quietly before tipping his head to one side and watching Snape eagerly with a bright, black eye. In his beak he held a buff envelope, and Snape took it from him with a frown.

'Good work, Dante. Your reward, such as it is. You're getting lazy.' Snape scratched the jackdaw on the top of its head before holding the mouse up by its tail. The bird grabbed it in its beak and hopped from his perch onto the floor. A sharp crunch made Snape grimace with distaste, and he walked into the other room to let the bird eat his feast alone.

Ensnconced in his leather chair with a glass of dark cognac in his hand, Snape stretched his legs out in front of the blazing fire and sighed contentedly. The majority of students were gone for the Christmas break, with the exception of those hoping to commence their apprenticeships, and the weight of responsibility on Snape's shoulders was considerably less than it had been two years ago. He was even starting to enjoy his job, which had the benefit of tempering his mood somewhat. The word 'dunderhead' rarely passed his lips these days.

Turning his attention to his post, he flipped the envelope over in his free hand and noticed the wax seal for the first time. He gazed for a moment on the familiar embossed image of antlers and a stoppered vial and placed his brandy on the arm of the chair. Sliding his fingers beneath the seal, he opened the letter carefully and removed the thick folded parchment. The neat, angular handwriting made Snape smile slightly, and he leant against the back of the chair to read.

'My dear boy,

I am remiss for not replying to your letter sooner, but I know you will forgive me.

We have been too long apart, and I have important news that will affect us both. It would not do to impart such information in a missive, so I propose we finally do what we have been promising each other for so many years.

Come and stay, Severus.

I know you have a break from your duties at this time, so I shall expect you at your earliest convenience.

Your Uncle,

Nikolai.'

Severus stared at the note, recognising it for the summons it was. Although he was deeply fond of his uncle, the tone of the note rankled and he had half a mind to ignore it until he saw fit to visit in his own good time. But there was something about it that sent a frisson of unease down his spine, something he hadn't felt since the demise of Voldemort.

Summoning a quill and parchment, he quickly wrote two brief messages, folding them carefully.

'Dante,' Snape called. The bird responded immediately and landed on Snape's outstretched forearm, taking the two notes from him. 'Take Dumbledore's first. The old goat probably knows anyway, but one must keep up appearances.'

Dante made a low grumbling noise in the back of his throat and ruffled his feathers in obvious irritation.

'I know, my friend. He has the same effect on me.' Snape chuckled. With a flick of his arm, the bird flew away.

The following day found Snape at the home of his forefathers, a large, four-storey house that sat on the corner of a street in the more affluent area of Bucharest. The street was full of similar buildings, but none were quite as imposing as the Aspen family seat. Not that there were many of the Aspens left, and they were not as influential in the area as they once were.

A slight shiver ran up Snape's spine as he approached the large wooden door. He had been a teenager at the time of his last visit, young and reckless. The truth of his family had been a great shock to him, and he had reacted in the extreme, lowering his personal defences to the point where Voldemort was able to use the chink in his armour to his own advantage. Shortly afterwards, he had willingly taken the Dark Mark, and the rest, as they say, was history. Severus wondered how different his life might have been had he not been as rash.

The door opened as he arrived, and he stepped inside a darkened entrance hall and removed his travelling cloak. Draping it over his arm, he walked down the hallway, lined as it was with portraits of people who bore more than a passing resemblance to Snape, and knocked on the study door.

'Come in, Severus,' a voice called softly. Severus smiled and opened the door to the room.

Sitting in a low chair opposite a large desk sat a tall, wiry man with greying hair that was brushed backwards to conceal his baldness. His face was paler even than Snape's, with hollowed cheeks and dark shadows beneath his eyes. He was impeccably dressed in a navy three piece suit, a matching tie fastened neatly at his throat. His shoes shone, and the precise inverted V of a pristine handkerchief jutted from his top pocket.

Turning his face to Severus slowly, the man revealed a long, aquiline nose and piercing grey eyes, and his thin lips curled into a small smile.

'Severus,' he said quietly, as he stood to greet the professor. Severus was visibly shocked, but stepped forward, his arms wide as he gently embraced the older man.

'Uncle Nikolai,' he murmured. 'It has been too long.' He felt a lump in his throat but fought to keep his emotions in check.

'It has been twenty years, boy. I know.' He waved off Severus as he opened his mouth to speak. 'You have been busy... A hero, no less?'

Severus watched with a pained expression as Nikolai Aspen sat down slowly. He had not considered how much his uncle would have aged, but as he pondered this, it made total sense. As his father's older brother, Nikolai had taken Severus under his wing and shown him his true heritage. Like many young people, he had always assumed Nikolai would remain a robust, fit man. This man before him was but a shadow of the memory he had of that time.

'Sit down, Severus. Please,' Nikolai almost begged, gesturing to the chair beside him.

Severus did as he was asked, as the reality of this situation started to sink in. With sudden clarity of thought, he stared at Nikolai in shock and felt his mouth go dry. He

knew now why Nikolai had requested his presence.

'You are dying,' he whispered.

Nikolai Aspen turned sad eyes to his nephew and nodded slowly. 'I am afraid I am,' he said.

Till Death I Depart

Chapter 2 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Albus Dumbledore was feeling old. The past few years had truly stretched him to his limits, and he had hoped that all of his trials were over. Not that he rested on his laurels, not by any means. He was still as observant and alert as he had ever been, but within the normal parameters of his role. This he could manage, despite his advancing years. He had even allowed himself to hope for a positive future for those who had also fought against Voldemort, those he had come to think of as family.

With a heavy heart, he removed his spectacles and dropped them haphazardly on his desk. He pinched the thin skin between his eyebrows and sighed before raising his gaze to one he loved as much as he would have done his own son. Severus Snape looked lost and dejected, as he had done on another day many years ago.

'You have a plan, Severus?' he asked him softly.

Severus curled his lip and barked out a humourless laugh. 'Oh, indeed. I intend to marry and produce offspring within the next twelve months,' he said blandly, 'and if I do not, I will die.'

'Oh, Severus,' Dumbledore said wearily. 'Could we perhaps have a conversation without the bitterness?'

'I apologise, Albus, but what in the name of Merlin do you expect?' Snape spat out. He stood and started to pace, his fists clenched tightly by his sides.

'I take it there is no one who...?' At Snape's angry glare, Dumbledore drifted off. No, of course Severus was not in a relationship. He rejected anyone who tried to gain his friendship, so woe betide any woman who might have the foolishness to set her heart on him.

Severus stopped pacing and sat back down, slumping in his seat like a disgruntled teenager. With a click of his fingers, he Summoned two glasses and a bottle of brandy, poured two large measures and shoved a glass towards Albus, who lifted it gratefully.

After a moment's silence, Snape began to speak again, this time in more measured tones.

'I blame myself,' he murmured, talking more to the brandy in his glass than to Dumbledore. 'I had the opportunity to marry some years ago, in accordance with my family tradition. There was an arrangement and a suitable match. Damn it, I even completed the compatibility forms myself and sent them back to Nikolai.'

'What stopped you from completing the arrangement?' Albus asked gently. Snape so rarely shared information with him voluntarily; he didn't want to push him too hard now.

Snape flashed his eyes up to Dumbledore briefly. 'My duties to my Masters.'

Dumbledore closed his eyes tightly and swallowed the lump in his throat. He had long ago acknowledged his own part in the corruption of Severus Snape. He had used him as a pawn, was willing to sacrifice him should the need arise. The guilt he felt was immense and Severus knew this. He used it as a sharp stick to poke him with whenever he needed to feel better. Albus sighed deeply. Now it would seem he would still have a hand in his death, but in a way neither had them would ever have imagined.

Albus took a long sip of brandy and pondered Snape's words while the younger man brooded in his chair. A slight hint of an idea drifted at the edge of Albus's thoughts, and he grabbed at it before he lost it again. How he hated having the mind of an old man when so much was at stake.

'Tell me about the matching. How does that work, exactly?' He polished his spectacles on his sleeve before putting them back on, and then grabbed a quill and some parchment.

'It is a formula that goes back over hundreds of years,' Severus began, his voice automatically slipping into the lilt he used with his students. 'Suitable candidates are sourced or may apply of their own volition. Both potential partners complete a compatibility questionnaire, and those that are the best match then meet. They discuss their own desires for a successful union, and on most occasions they then marry. It is vital that the bride is in agreement, naturally.' He paused, lifting his glass and draining it.

'Why is that, Severus?' Albus frowned and stopped writing.

Severus levelled an ironic gaze at Dumbledore. 'For the Turning, Albus.'

'Ah, yes. Of course,' he replied faintly.

Severus laughed a harsh sound that made Albus wince. 'Surely you haven't forgotten, Albus?' he said smoothly. 'Or did you think that I murdered my father for no good reason?'

'Enough, Severus. That is one aspect of your past I had forgiven and forgotten, and I had hoped that I had convinced you to do the same. You would not repeat your father's mistakes. I believe that, even if you do not.' Dumbledore felt his ire rising and he fixed Snape with a steely glare that gave no room for argument. Snape bowed his head, abashed.

'Forgive me, Albus. This whole situation is trying me somewhat,' he whispered.

'And I, Severus,' Albus murmured. 'How is your uncle?' he said, changing the subject.

'Sick. We do not know how long we have, a month or two at most.' Severus reached for the brandy.

'Then the clock is not ticking yet.' Albus relaxed into his chair and tapped at his bearded chin with the end of his quill. 'We can resolve this, Severus.'

Snape looked at Dumbledore and lifted an eyebrow in disbelief. 'Perhaps.'

The great hall was abuzz with excitement as the remaining students and staff of Hogwarts gathered for the post-selection feast. There were only a limited number of apprenticeships available, and for many, this would be the last time they would join in such a happy occasion at the school. The reality of leaving Hogwarts was too much for some, and in the midst of all of the laughter, one student sat staring at her empty plate, ignoring the chatter around her.

Severus Snape sat at the far end of the large table around which everyone was sat. He didn't mind sitting with the students. Draco Malfoy was to his left, Blaise Zabini to his right, and they were making conversation across him as he sat back in his chair and watched. From this position, he could look directly at Hermione Granger without her noticing him, yet he was not so close that she would distract him. For distract him she most certainly did.

The worst thing about Snape's heritage, in his opinion, was his heightened sense of smell. Ordinarily, this could be seen to be an advantage for someone who may utilise all of his senses in potion making. It had certainly helped him to sense potions that were not at full strength, or were starting to deteriorate in their vials. It also meant that Snape knew when a woman was at her most fertile. It was a pleasant, light, flowery scent that he could tolerate well enough. It also helped him to allow for certain mood swings or tearful outbursts, and as Head of Slytherin, he had gained quite a reputation for anticipating when his female students may need a little more leeway.

More recently, however, Snape had become aware of another scent. It was sultry and alluring, a mix of musk and vanilla. It had taken him a while to find the source, and how ironic that this intoxicating aroma that was driving him wild was that of Hermione Granger. It was not just her perfume or the hair products she had taken to using. This was more, so much more. Hermione Granger was turning into a woman, and Severus Snape could smell it.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small vial. It was warm against his palm, and he paused, feeling the throb from within. With a quick flick of his wrist, he emptied the thick liquid into his red wine and then lifted the glass and swirled it until both were mixed. Raising the glass to his lips, his eye caught that of Granger, who was leaning slightly forward and watching him intently. He raised his glass at her in acknowledgement, and then smirked as the witch gasped and quickly looked away, a tell-tale blush flooding her cheeks. He drank slowly, careful not to waste a drop, and anticipated what tomorrow would bring.

He was so preoccupied that he didn't notice Albus Dumbledore observing him with a slight frown.

Softly, Softly, Catchy Monkey

Chapter 3 of 14

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There was a surprisingly long line of students outside the dungeon the next day. It seemed that Snape's personality had changed so much, he no longer put them off, and if they had been asked, many would have said that Professor Snape was by far the best teacher they had.

Professor Dumbledore opened the door and ushered in the first student, Draco Malfoy, who smirked and shot a look at the end of the queue. Hermione Granger glared back at him and stood straighter, her folder of parchments clutched tightly to her burgeoning bosom. She was as nervous as hell, but she wouldn't let the competition affect her. She was more worried about facing Professor Snape.

Hermione wasn't a fan of change. She liked things to be in their place, books on their right shelf in the library and her teachers to be predictable so that she knew how to react and what to expect. Professor Snape, however, was being anything but predictable. Of course, she had expected his demeanour to change after Voldemort's death. After acting as a spy and being at the Dark Lord's beck and call for so many years, having freedom to be himself was bound to lighten his spirit, if nothing else. But after deciding that Potions was her apprenticeship of choice, Hermione had been watching Severus Snape more closely.

The first thing that she noticed was the tone of his voice. Where there was once a dull monotone, edged with the occasional rasp on days when he had seemed particularly drawn, now there was a hint of a musical lilt and a silky smoothness that had caused Hermione to break out in goose bumps more than once. His face had changed too. Lines were smoother, and the permanent frown he used to wear had been replaced with calm indifference. Some people might not have noticed that subtle change, but it was there all the same. Add to that the longer hair and the more athletic build (Hermione wondered if he worked out) and Severus Snape had slowly morphed into quite a dashing and intriguing figure.

Hermione was interrupted from her reverie as the dungeon door flew open. Snape stepped to one side to allow Draco Malfoy to leave, and Hermione was slightly relieved to see that the smug look had gone from his face as he stalked past her. In fact, he looked quite annoyed indeed, and as she looked past the line of students to where Snape stood, his eyes followed Draco's swift exit blandly. He shifted his gaze impassively to Hermione, and she held her ground until he ushered in the next student and closed the door.

It took over an hour before Hermione was finally alone in the dungeon hallway, facing the imposing wooden door and a decision on her future as a Potions mistress. She had other options, of course. Two acceptance letters had arrived by owl that morning, apprenticeships with other Potions masters. But none had Snape's reputation for excellence, and deep down, Hermione wasn't ready to leave Hogwarts yet.

Her palms started to sweat slightly, and she cursed under her breath as she wiped her hands down the front of her skirt, just as the door opened. Robert Courtney, a Hufflepuff, nodded to Hermione as he walked from the room and murmured good luck to her. Hermione was so focussed she didn't hear him, but as she made to walk forward, Dumbledore stepped into the doorway and held his hand up to stop her.

'If you wouldn't mind waiting for another few moments, Miss Granger. I believe Professor Snape and I require a short break.' He smiled warmly, and Hermione let out a breath of air. Without waiting for her answer, Dumbledore disappeared back into the dungeon and closed the door firmly.

Severus looked up from his desk, expecting to see Hermione Granger in front of him. Seeing only Albus, he raised his eyebrows in question.

'Problem?' he asked, hoping fervently that the witch hadn't changed her mind.

'Miss Granger is happy to wait a moment, Severus,' Albus said. Severus's eyes widened as he noted the serious tone in the Headmaster's voice, and he sat back brusquely.

'Spit it out, Albus.' Severus crossed his arms and watched as Dumbledore paused, obviously choosing his words carefully.

'Have you given any further thought to your search for a bride?' he asked.

'Some,' Severus snapped. 'But tell me: what has this to do with appointing an apprentice, Albus? Granger won't wait forever.'

'It has everything to do with it,' Albus sighed. 'You only have one female candidate, and while I may be old, I am no fool. Promise me that your intentions towards Miss Granger are honourable, Severus.'

Severus schooled his expression into one he had practiced many times over the years and fought to quell the urge to hex Albus into the nearest wall.

'You give me little credit, Headmaster. I am interviewing Granger purely for the apprenticeship, a post she has yet to prove worthy of. She is a student, Albus,' he said softly.

'Do not try to hoodwink me, Severus!' Albus slammed his hand onto the desk, causing Severus to push his chair back abruptly and reach for his wand. 'I have seen the way you look at her, and I understand your instincts. Granger is not available to you, do you understand me?'

Severus placed his wand into his sleeve slowly, holding Albus's angry gaze as he did so.

'I would never force her to do anything against her wishes, Albus. Wasn't it you who said only yesterday that I am not my father's son?' Snape curled his lip in disdain.

'If Miss Granger is successful today, as I fear she will be, she will have no reason to know your circumstances, Severus, and you will not volunteer any information. Is that clear?' Albus spoke so quietly that Snape had to strain to hear him, but there was no mistaking the threat held in his words.

'Perfectly,' he replied.

Dumbledore stared at Severus for a few moments before nodding. 'We understand each other then,' he said neutrally. He turned and walked back towards the door.

Hermione jumped back as the door opened, and Dumbledore stood in front of her. She smiled weakly and hoped that the Headmaster didn't realise he hadn't cast a Silencing Charm before speaking with Professor Snape. She hadn't been able to hear clearly, but whatever it was, Dumbledore must have been very angry. She pushed the thought to the back of her mind. She had more important things to think about.

With a deep breath, she followed the old wizard into the dungeon and took a seat on the uncomfortable wooden chair before Professor Snape's desk. She fumbled awkwardly with her folder and didn't notice that Professor Snape had walked around to where she sat until his hand came into view. Tentatively, she held out the folder, not sure what was unnerving her more, the Professor's intimidating presence, or the distinct iciness between him and the Headmaster. As the Professor returned to his seat, Hermione calmed her breathing and forced herself to remember the purpose for the meeting.

'Would you care for a glass of water, Miss Granger?' Dumbledore smiled at her gently, and she nodded, grateful for the distraction as Professor Snape perused her dissertation. She took the glass and sipped as she watched for any sign of, well, anything, to cross Snape's face. After a moment, he closed the folder and pushed it back across the desk. He didn't look happy, and a ball of anxiety formed in Hermione's gut as she waited for the rejection she was sure was coming.

'Commendable, Granger. Which presents us with a problem.' Snape pushed his chair back from the desk, and Hermione noticed with interest a slight flaring of his nostrils as he inhaled.

'Sir?' she asked.

'Both yourself and one other student have provided me with work that would be more than acceptable in order to fulfil the criteria of the Potions apprenticeship. To put it the Muggle way...' He paused, and Hermione could have sworn she noticed a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. 'We have a tie.'

'A tie, sir?' Hermione let her eyes fall. There was only one other student who had matched her Potions scores, and that was Draco. A Slytherin, and one of Snape's favourites. She had no chance.

'Don't worry, Miss Granger. A simple exam, set by Professor Snape, will be the deciding factor. You have four days before you leave for the Burrow for the festive season, am I right?' Dumbledore stood behind Hermione, his gnarled hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

'That's right, sir. I was hoping not to have to study over Christmas this year,' she said, disappointment evident in her voice.

'Indeed. As luck would have it, the exam will take place in two days time. Both of you will sit in here with me, and I will deliver the result before the end of that day. I hope that suits your plans, Miss Granger.'

Hermione snapped her eyes to Professor Snape, who was staring at her hard. 'Yes, Professor, thank you,' she stammered, 'that is, of course, I will do whatever suits you, sir.' She smiled at him in an attempt to temper his mood. There was a brief quirk to the corner of Snape's mouth in response.

'I am sure you will,' he replied smoothly.

Dumbledore coughed and patted Hermione on her shoulder, prompting her to leave the room. At the door, Hermione paused and looked back to thank Professor Snape, but he was no where to be seen.

'You have some revision to do, I believe.' Dumbledore looked at her kindly, and Hermione couldn't help but feel a rush of affection for him.

'Yes. Thank you, sir,' she said, then walked back towards Gryffindor Tower.

Come Into My Parlour

Chapter 4 of 14

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Hermione sat at her desk, fiddling anxiously with her quill. The goose feathers were soft to touch, the nib firm and perfectly chiselled, and it was a source of fascination as

she studiously avoided Draco Malfoy's penetrating stare.

'Scared, Granger?' he drawled softly. She turned her head to him reluctantly and sat up straight in her chair.

'Not really. Are you?' She answered as coolly as she could and tried not to give away her nerves.

Draco Malfoy snorted and his eyes narrowed as he looked at her. Leaning towards her, he lowered his voice to a whisper.

'Don't think that pretty little flower between your legs will have any effect on Snape, Granger. Word has it, I'm more his type. This test.' He waved his hand about for effect. 'It's a mere formality for Dumbledore's benefit. Snape already told me I'm as good as in.'

'I'm sure Professor Dumbledore would be keen to view this memory when I give it to him later, then, Malfoy.' Hermione's eyes flared with anger as she hissed at him, her face flushing at his words

Malfoy withdrew his wand and pointed it at her. 'A small Obliviate will sort you out, Mudblood...'

Snape gathered up the parchments from his desk and walked through to the classroom, his robes swirling around him as if controlled by a life force of their own. The door slammed shut behind him just as Malfoy pulled his wand out.

'*Expelliarmus!*' Snape yelled, his feet moving quickly as he rushed to catch Draco's wand as it flew from his hand.

Snape glared at both students, obviously furious. 'What part of 'no wands' did you not understand, Mr. Malfoy? I made the rules perfectly clear, did I not?'

'I must have missed that part,' Draco muttered, his eyes not quite meeting Snape's.

'Granger, did he cast anything?' Snape asked.

'No, sir. You arrived just in time. Thank you.' Hermione smiled slightly, but her relief was cut short as Draco murmured 'no flowers' under his breath, and she turned to glare at him.

'Enough!' Snape shouted. 'You are both of age. I expect you to behave as adults, not ridiculously jealous first years!'

Hermione looked down at the surface of the desk in front of her. She wouldn't apologise. Draco was at fault, but she didn't hold out much hope of him owning up to anything. She was smart enough to know he was fighting for his place like a Slytherin, but the knot in her stomach wouldn't go away. What if his words were true and Snape really had already offered him the place? Her only hope was to excel at the test.

Snape pocketed Malfoy's wand, then methodically sorted through the papers before placing them on the desks face down in front of each of them.

'The test is straight-forward. Questions about potions, ingredients, nothing you haven't covered in your classes over the past year. In addition, and because I will have the dubious pleasure of working alongside one of you for the next three years,' Snape sneered slightly at this, 'there is a short set of personal questions at the end of the paper.' He walked quickly to his desk at the front of the classroom and sat with a flourish. Raising eyes to begin the test, he sighed loudly at the sight of Hermione Granger with her hand in the air.

'What is it, Granger?' he said quietly.

'Personal questions, sir? I don't understand why they're necessary. You know both of us already.' Hermione looked at him with wide, innocent eyes, clearly non-plussed.

'It is part of the test, Granger. All you need to do is answer the questions. I wish to determine which of my students will be best suited to me.' Snape cast his eyes to the hour glass beside him and was about to turn it over when a snigger from Malfoy stopped him.

'Alternatively, as one of you appears to be more immature than I had realised, I could dispense with the test and appoint you now, Miss Granger.'

'No, sir. I would prefer to gain an apprenticeship through my own efforts. I shouldn't have pried, sir.' Hermione fidgeted in her seat. The whole situation was becoming tense and uncomfortable, and she just wanted to get it over with.

'Then you may begin.'

With a deft movement, Snape turned over the hour glass, and Hermione watched mesmerised for a moment as the sand began to trickle slowly through the centre. The sound of quill on parchment shook her, and she realised that Malfoy had already started to answer the first set of questions. She turned over her paper, lifted her quill, and began to read.

Dumbledore tapped the silver instrument on his desk and watched as the lever bobbed on its axis. He sighed deeply, something he seemed to be doing a lot of recently, and then turned his attention to the list of names in front of him. He had hoped there would be someone amongst them who would suit Severus. Now, he knew it was a lost cause. The hunted was now the hunter, and his prey was Hermione Granger.

He had spent a significant amount of time researching the Strigoi, but the books in the Ministry library had been less than helpful. He had turned to his old friend Gabriel Thantos, who was a Strigoi scholar and an expert in his own culture and history. He knew facts that even those fully immersed in the lifestyle would be unaware of, and Albus feared that this was the case with Severus, who seemed oblivious to what was happening to him. He lifted the letter on his desk and read through it again, hoping that perhaps the prediction had changed between readings.

'Albus, old friend,

I fear my information will be unsettling, but it is fact that you requested, yes?

There are some Strigoi who will sense a mate without the accepted methods of matching. The term for this is The Calling, and it most often occurs if the Strigoi male is not mated until later in life, such as the case with your colleague. If he was already mated and had offspring, this phenomenon would not have manifested itself, but his body is telling him that a mate is now needed, and he will search out suitable females from those around him. Once a Strigoi senses a suitable mate, nothing will stop him from attaining her.

You would do well to inform the female of the situation, Albus. A willing mate is more preferable. An unwilling mate, well... let us just say that the Strigoi would stop at nothing to get what he desires, regardless of her wishes.

Not his fault, you understand. The Calling is in his blood, and one cannot argue with that which is innate.

My best,

Gabriel'

Dumbledore scowled and crushed the parchment in his hand in frustration. Now he needed to decide who to tell. Severus, or Miss Granger.

Smugness was not a state that Severus Snape experienced too often, but if there were a way to describe how he was feeling at this particularly moment, smug would be it. Not only had Granger beaten Draco Malfoy hands down in the potions test, she had answered his 'personality test' just as he had expected. Her answers were full to the point of drifting off the page, and all he needed to do now was compare them to his own and mark them accordingly. He had a very good feeling that they would be compatible in more areas than the Potions lab, and the thought of the witch lying prone and half-dressed on his bed caused a twitch in his nether regions.

In his imagination, however, she was older, with fuller breasts and firm, well-developed thighs. In other words, Snape did not lust over the witch as she was, but as she would be. It soothed his conscience, such as it was. And yet, the effect her scent was having on him was becoming more pronounced. He had been desperate to make a swift exit after her interview and had run to his quarters as soon as her back was turned. He had loosened his collar to aid his breathing, and loosened the buttons of his crotch even faster, releasing his heavy length and dealing with the problem in hand quicker than it had taken Dumbledore to return to his desk.

Shaking his head, he allowed himself a small chuckle at his own cleverness. Dumbledore, for once, had no idea what he had done, and it was a very good feeling indeed. Now all he had to do was give Granger the good news. He couldn't wait to see her smile aimed in his direction.

Daggers In Men's Smiles

Chapter 5 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

A/N: Just a small thing to note. Because this story was written for the LJ Exchange, I had a limited time frame in which to complete it. Therefore it may seem that the story moves very quickly in parts. It was the only way to get it done! It is complete in 14 chapters.

Much thanks to astopperindeath for the Beta, everyone who has reviewed so far, and admin staff here at The Petulant Poetess for their patience. Remaining errors are all my own.

Hermione sat at the kitchen table in the Burrow and smiled at the scene around her. Fred and George were 'helping' Molly with the dishes, but as she washed them and placed them on the drainer, Fred dried them and slipped each clean plate behind her back to his brother, who then put them back on the pile to wash. Ron and Harry sat at the table concentrating on the game of chess they had just started, while Arthur frowned over a Muggle crossword puzzle.

Letting her mind drift, Hermione was acutely aware that this was likely to be her last Christmas here. She had no idea what her future would bring, but it was doubtful she would be back at The Burrow any time soon. In her room sat a tightly scrolled parchment which contained her study schedule for the new term. She hadn't looked at it yet. In fact, she had been trying hard not to even think about it, because to think about that would mean having to think about the moment she had received it from Professor Snape. Her face flushed, and she was grateful when Ginny distracted her by landing in the seat beside her and flinging her arm over her shoulders.

'Sickle for your thoughts?' she said, beaming at her. Ginny was full of the joys of the festive season, now that the war was over and she had Harry back for good, and Hermione found her enthusiasm touching.

'You really don't want to know,' she replied.

Ron grinned at her. 'She's thinking about school of course. It's all she ever thinks about, isn't it?'

'It's not school for me anymore, Ron. This is my apprenticeship, my future. And I wasn't thinking about that, actually.' Hermione stared back at Ron indignantly.

'So if it wasn't school, what else had you looking so dreamy?' Ginny wasn't going to give up.

'I don't want to talk about it in front of them,' she whispered into Ginny's ear.

'Oooh!' Her friend squealed so loudly that Fred and George tired of their sport and turned to listen. 'It's a boy!'

'What's this?' said George, sitting down beside Hermione and nudging her. 'You're having a baby? Didn't know you were that sort of girl.'

'Yeh, 'Mione. If I'd know you were that keen, I'd have let you have first choice before Angie.' Fred slouched against the fireplace and let a slow, lavisious grin spread across his face.

Ginny scowled at her brothers and pulled Hermione up by her elbow. 'Idiots. I meant it's about a boy. C'mon, Hermione.'

Hermione felt her face burning red as another round of raucous comments flew between the twins and the sound of a plaintive Ron followed her up the stairs.

'But Hermione's not interested in boys...' he said pathetically.

In Ginny's room, Hermione grabbed a large, squashy blue cushion and curled herself around it, slipping off her shoes and tucking her feet beneath her. Ginny ensconced herself at the other end of the bed. Her slim legs were clad in an old pair of Hermione's jeans, and she stretched out lazily. She looked at Hermione and giggled slightly.

'It's not really a boy, is it?' she said quietly.

'No, it's not.' Hermione took a deep breath. 'Ginny, have you noticed anything different about Professor Snape?'

'Snape? Let me think. He's grouchy, ugly and greasy, marches about like the world owes him a favour... nope. He's no different!' She laughed.

'Well, he's being different with me,' she said, her brow creasing.

'Well, maybe he has to be now that you're going to be working for him?' Ginny started to plait her hair idly.

'It started before that, but he was really weird when he told me I'd got my place. It creeped me out a bit, to be honest,' she said.

'Merlin... What happened?' Ginny sat forward and forgot about her hair, suddenly rapt.

'Well, I was in the library,' she began.

'Of course...' Ginny interrupted with a grin.

'Ha ha...' Hermione laughed. 'Seriously, it was so odd. I was reading a book in the Restricted Section. I thought it would be good to do some advance research on my project, just in case I did get the apprenticeship, you know what I mean?' Hermione caught Ginny's eyes as they widened slightly. 'Sorry, right... I'll get to the point. I didn't even hear him arrive, Gin, and suddenly I looked up and he was standing right over me. I could swear, Gin, he had his eyes closed and he... well, he looked like he was sniffing me!' Hermione looked at her friend beseechingly.

'That's so gross. Are you sure?' Ginny's lip curled in distaste.

'Well, I could be wrong, but I think I've seen him do it before. At my interview.'

Hermione slumped back against the wall and hugged the cushion tighter.

Ginny started to laugh. 'That's it then. You got the apprenticeship because you smell great and Malfoy stinks!'

Hermione couldn't help but grin. 'Don't be silly. It wasn't the only thing, Gin.' She bit her lip.

'Well, go on...' Ginny nudged her.

'He smiled at me.' She closed her eyes, fully aware that her face was burning and that Ginny was probably gaping at her like a hungry fish.

The memory of Snape's smile was the one she had tried to ignore the most. Not because it wasn't a nice experience; far from it. And that was the problem. Snape smiled, and it lit up his face, transforming him into Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. She hadn't been able to resist smiling back, and they had stood for more than a few seconds grinning at each other like fools, until Hermione had grabbed her scroll and ducked past him out of the library.

Hermione opened her eyes and found Ginny looking at her curiously. 'What?'

'I was just wondering what he sees in you, that's all.' She grinned cheekily.

'What are you on about?' Hermione was not up to speed on the hidden language of females.

'Well, it makes total sense. Snape fancies you, of course.' Ginny started to laugh.

'Shut up.' Hermione laughed and threw the cushion at her, and the conversation was suddenly forgotten in the midst of a pillow fight.

Back at Hogwarts, Snape was not having anywhere near as much fun. The snow had finally arrived, covering the grounds like a thick white duvet. Dumbledore had insisted they go walking together to enjoy the sparkling scenery and the crisp fresh air. Snape trudged along beside him, his hands thrust deep inside the pockets of his thick travelling cloak, as he waited for him to get to the point. Things were still a tad strained between them, and he assumed this was Dumbledore's way of generating an opportunity for informal conversation. However, Severus was feeling less than inclined to make the first move, so they walked for a good fifteen minutes in silence, until they reached the edge of the Great Lake. The surface was frozen, and Dumbledore used his wand to melt the ice.

'The giant squid likes to surface occasionally. I do what I can to help,' he said amiably.

'Indeed,' Severus murmured through tight lips.

'Oh, Severus.' Dumbledore turned to him and placed a hand on his arm. 'I was hard on you, my boy. I had no knowledge of your circumstances... I am so sorry.'

'What are you babbling about now?' Severus shook off Dumbledore's hand impatiently and walked away to stare out across the lake.

'You know of Gabriel Thantos, Severus?' Dumbledore stood shoulder to shoulder and followed his gaze as he spoke.

'I have heard of him, of course. He is a contemporary of Nikolai,' he replied, turning to look at Dumbledore curiously. 'What of him?'

'He and I are friends, although I have not shared his company for some time. I apologise, Severus, but I needed guidance. I know little of the ways of your people, and my own resources were less than helpful. I wrote to him. In confidence, you understand.' Dumbledore's shoulders slumped as if resigned for a verbal onslaught.

'He was enlightening, I take it?' Severus snorted under his breath. Of course, Dumbledore would explore any avenue to protect his students from the resident vampire. He should have anticipated it.

'Severus, what do you know of The Calling?' Albus asked him.

Severus frowned. 'The term means nothing to me.'

'I thought as much.' Albus sighed. 'Come back to the castle, Severus. I think you need to read this for yourself.'

Hermione lay in bed listening to the soft huff of Ginny's breathing as the younger girl slept. She replayed their conversation, and her internal dialogue argued with itself.

Of course Snape must fancy me; that must be why he's being so... different, and well, quite nice. For Snape.

That's just ridiculous! He's twenty years older than me, and he's my teacher. He's never really liked me, so why would he be interested now?

Not that it mattered either way. Hermione had never thought about any of her professors in that way, especially not Snape. Granted, she had thought Lockhart was cute until she realised what a fraud he was. His smile had been false along, she thought ruefully. Not like Professor Snape's.

Like a tennis match, her thoughts went back and forth until she exhausted herself. She finally fell asleep thinking of Snape's smile and the way his nostrils flared as he inhaled her.

The view from the Astronomy Tower was quite something, especially so on nights like this. The moon illuminated everything with a subdued silver glow, and the snow bounced the light around, creating shadows and vistas that undulated and moved. It seemed so unreal. Severus gazed across to the Forbidden Forest, where a Thestral rose above the tree tops and flicked its wings, shaking snow from the branches of a near by fir tree and making it stand out starkly.

Shuddering, he wrapped his cloak about him and adjusted his position. The window alcoves provided less than comfortable seating, but he didn't bother with a cushioning charm. He wanted to feel everything. A blast of icy wind hit him, and his hair whipped about his face. Shaking his head irritably, it fell back into place, and he leaned back against the cold, stone wall.

He wanted to curse Albus for meddling, but he couldn't find it in him. In a way, the old man had done him a favour, not that he would ever tell him that. But his news changed everything, and for the first time in a very long time, Severus was sickened by his own heritage.

He had hoped his growing attraction to Granger was normal. Well, normal in that he was male and she, most definitely, female. He had hoped that with careful planning and subtle seduction, he could convince her that being with him would be a very good idea indeed. Better, he was hoping to convince her that the idea was all hers. But now, the realisation that his feelings towards her were an innate response to his Strigoi genes made the whole thing less appealing. He would not be false with her or force her against her will, regardless of his base desires. He was not his father.

A well of emotion exploded from him as he thought of Hermione's smile, and his thoughts became a muddle as his mother's face swam before him, haggard and gaunt, her eyes pale and empty. He growled in frustration and cast his eyes towards the stars above him.

'I am not my father,' he muttered.

A Blurring Of The Edges

Chapter 6 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Snape stood quietly in the shadow of the doorway and watched as Hermione Granger brewed her umpteenth batch of potions in his lab. He thrilled at the sight of her, his breath catching in his throat as she glanced up at him and smiled warily. After a month as his apprentice, Granger was still not quite sure of him.

His body ached for her, but as far as the flesh was willing, his spirit was still strong and The Calling had not overtaken him thus far. He hoped fervently that she would come to appreciate him before it came to that, but there was no telling when the urge might become too much, or how exactly it would manifest. He would never forgive himself if he harmed her, or worse, forced himself upon her like a Death Eater at a revel.

He straightened his robes carefully as he entered the room, and then walked up to the workbench beside her to look at her potion.

'Finished, Granger?'

'Almost, sir. I just need to add the porcupine quills once I've taken the cauldron off the fire,' she replied. A length of hair escaped the tight band that held her curls from her face. Without thinking, Snape lifted it and tucked it behind her ear. Hermione paused and looked up at him in surprise.

'Thank you, sir,' she whispered.

Severus frowned and berated himself inwardly for being so forward. 'You could have ruined a whole batch of boil cure potion if even one hair had fallen into the cauldron,' he said coldly. 'Find more adequate ways to control it.'

He looked down his nose at her, ignored her flushed face and spun on his heel to walk back towards the door. He was almost there, with a mind to slam it hard behind him to cover his own embarrassment, when a searing pain hit him squarely between his eyes and travelled down to his chest.

'Fuck!' he gasped. He clutched at his robes and almost doubled over in pain.

'Professor!' Granger's panicked voice was somewhere behind him, but he could hardly breathe to answer as the pain became worse and he crumpled slowly to the floor.

Hermione flicked her wand hastily at the cauldron, turning out the flame and casting a stasis charm, and ran to where the Professor now lay on the floor. His eyes were closed and he was clutching at his chest in obvious pain. His face was deathly white, and perspiration beaded his brow and top lip. His breathing was laboured, and Hermione wondered if wizards could suffer from cardiac arrest in the same way as Muggles.

'Professor Snape!' She shook his arm carefully but there was no response. 'Oh, gods...'

She ran into the Professor's private quarters for the first time, but didn't bother to look around. Her subconscious did make a note of the large overcrowded bookshelf beside the fireplace to consider more fully later, but right now she had more urgent business. Throwing a handful of Floo powder into the grate, she immediately called for Professor Dumbledore.

Dumbledore almost leapt through the flames at Hermione's message, and she gratefully stepped aside and let him hastily lead the way back to the lab, where he dropped to his knees beside Severus.

'My boy,' he said quietly. 'What has happened to you?' He lifted Severus's hand carefully.

To Hermione's relief, Professor Snape opened his eyes and stared at Dumbledore with what looked like fear. He took a slow, obviously painful breath.

'Nikolai is dead,' he whispered.

The hospital wing was almost empty. In a bed nearest to Madam Pomfrey's office, Severus lay sleeping, curtained off from the prying eyes of the students who had yet to hear of the dramatic events of the day. Albus Dumbledore sat beside him and watched his breathing, shallow but even, thanks to a range of potions, and he pondered just how many times he had sat at his bedside in the past. This time was so very different. This time, Severus was under a death sentence, unless they acted to stop it. It seemed inevitable to Dumbledore that Hermione Granger would need to be taken into their confidence, but how the information would affect the girl worried him.

It hadn't escaped Dumbledore's notice that Hermione had an admiration for Severus Snape. In the weeks following her successful appointment, he had observed their interactions closely. Severus treated her with respect and was more polite to her than anyone else at the top table, including himself. There was little conversation between them, but plenty of eye contact. Hermione smiled at Severus quite often, and on one occasion it had been reciprocated, much to Albus's amusement. He was sure that Severus hadn't even been aware of it.

In all of her years at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger had never put herself first. She had spent her most important school years aiding Harry Potter, and Dumbledore was in absolutely no doubt that without her, the war would have ended differently. They owed her much, and yet all he could have hoped for her was the opportunity of a normal life and the chance to reach her potential as a talented, vibrant and intelligent witch. Now, it would seem, he would have to put a potential road block in her way, for there was no doubt in his mind that Hermione would yet again sacrifice her own wants and needs for another.

Dumbledore's eyes closed and he was almost snoring in the chair when he heard light footsteps approach.

'Professor?' Hermione called softly.

Dumbledore stepped through the curtains and placed a kind hand on Hermione's shoulder. 'Severus is sleeping, Miss Granger, but he will be well, I assure you.'

Hermione looked up at him, her eyes wide and slightly red. He realised she had been crying and had probably been on her own since he and Poppy had removed Severus from the dungeon, and he felt suddenly annoyed with himself for not even thinking of her. It was something Severus had accused him of many times during the war, not considering the needs of others. 'There are more people fighting the war than Harry bloody Potter!' he had said.

'What happened, sir? Was it a heart attack?' Hermione bit her lower lip to stop it from trembling.

'No, not a heart attack, Miss Granger. Let's have some tea, shall we?' Albus placed his arm around Hermione's thin shoulders and guided her to his office.

Hermione felt under-dressed as she sat opposite Dumbledore in her jeans and pink turtleneck jumper. His robes that day were lime green and purple, but the vivid colours contrasted sharply with his sombre mood. For all his protestations that Professor Snape would be well, Hermione could see that he was worried. She sipped her cup of tea thoughtfully and then took the bull by the horns.

'What is wrong with Professor Snape, sir?'

She spoke clearly and with authority, as if addressing Ron or Harry. Dumbledore seemed to realise that Hermione Granger was not a child any longer, and his eyes met hers gravely.

'Miss Granger, I have a tale to tell that is not mine, and Severus will likely be angry with us both when he knows what I have shared. Nevertheless, I feel there is no option but to tell you.' Dumbledore clasped his hands together and sat forwards, resting his elbows on his desk.

'Miss Granger,' he started. 'Hermione... What do you know of the Strigoi?'

Hermione looked at Dumbledore over the lip of her cup, and her quick mind began to join a few dots. There were times Professor Snape was paler than usual. He hardly ate his food, picking at it and pushing it around his plate. He could appear in corridors and hallways as if he had just silently Apparated there. Then there were the vials of fresh blood in the store of the lab. Hermione had asked him about it once and been told it was his private stock for his own research purposes, but the supply went down each week, and as far as Hermione could tell, Professor Snape had not been brewing or doing any research that she had noticed.

'Professor Snape is a vampire...!' She gasped with sudden realisation.

'Not in the mythical, story-book sense, you understand. Severus's father was Strigoi, but his mother was a witch. His physiology is unique. It's really quite fascinating...!' Dumbledore smiled sadly.

'So why is he sick? Does he need some blood?' Hermione frowned. She had read a little about vampires in the library, but it was only basic information. She knew enough to know they didn't go around biting people's necks whenever they felt like it, provided there was a source of blood for food. Most modern vampires would have a stock like Professor Snape's.

'Alas, Severus's case is complex. He is the very last of his line, Hermione. His Uncle Nikolai died at around the time he collapsed in the lab. His pain was caused by Nikolai's soul taking up residence within his body. He will be able to function almost normally after a few days rest, I believe.'

Hermione stared at Dumbledore and tried to take in what he was saying. Surely a body couldn't accommodate two souls for any length of time? It would be exhausting. She wondered which soul would be dominant, and if the new soul could affect Snape's personality. She was just getting used to him as he was. She didn't think she could bear a change again.

'What will happen to Professor Snape, sir? Will his soul be the dominant one? I don't know how a body could cope with that physically,' she mused out loud.

'That is where the problem lies, I am afraid. Professor Snape is strong, but even so, his physical body will only be able to accommodate two souls for about a year.' Dumbledore looked away. 'Then he will die.'

Hermione could feel tears in her eyes. She loved being the Potion master's apprentice, and she had grown to like Professor Snape, despite his moods and occasionally sharp tongue.

'No!' she snapped vehemently. 'There has to be some way of saving him. Otherwise, the whole Strigoi line would have died out before now.' Her eyes blazed brightly as she fought not to cry.

'Astute as always, Miss Granger. There is only one way to save Severus, but it is unlikely to be a success.' Dumbledore closed his eyes and clasped his hands in his lap firmly.

'What is it, Headmaster? If there is a way, then we have to do it!' Hermione couldn't understand Dumbledore's reluctance.

Dumbledore opened his eyes, and Hermione was surprised that he looked as if he may weep.

'Severus would need to have a child, Hermione. An empty vessel, if you will, in which the second soul could live. It would be the only way.'

Hermione let out a slow breath. Professor Snape wasn't married, and she didn't think he had a girlfriend, because he was always in the castle. He never had female visitors, and the fact that he was so damn uptight was a pretty good clue that he wasn't having sex on a regular basis. There was little probability he would be having a child any time soon. Hermione felt a lump in her throat and brushed away an errant tear.

Dumbledore shifted in his seat and sighed softly. 'I know, Hermione. It seems as impossible as a Muggle catching sight of the faeries at the bottom of the garden, I'm afraid.'

Hermione's eyes widened as she looked at him. 'I saw faeries in my garden when I was six years old,' she whispered.

All The Knowledge I Possess

Chapter 7 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

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A/N: Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to review. Very much appreciated.

Hermione was exhausted. She wiped down the workbench slowly and cast the necessary cleansing charms to disinfect and sterilise the area, ready for another long day tomorrow.

Professor Snape had been released from the hospital wing the previous evening and had only entered the lab once that day to check that she was there. Hermione had forced herself to behave as she would normally do, but knowing what she did of him had changed everything. Instead of her moody and irritable Professor, she saw the pitiful sight of a man desperately trying to hold onto whatever was left of his dignity. He had looked at her in a haunted, almost frightened way, and it was then that she realised Dumbledore had told him of their conversation. Snape knew that she knew and had avoided her ever since.

She glanced at the door that led into Snape's private quarters, and her stomach churned as she took the first tentative steps towards it. Knocking lightly, she almost hoped he wouldn't hear her, so that she could leave and deal with it another day. The door clicked open, and she laughed to herself. Snape must have ears like a bat!

Seeing the open door as a positive invitation, she walked through and into Snape's private quarters with a little more confidence than before. He was seated at a small writing desk tucked into an alcove beside the bookshelf, his shoulders hunched over a sheet of parchment as he wrote almost urgently. Hermione could feel the waves of despair permeating the room, so instead of speaking she slid quietly into a nearby armchair and waited. Her heart felt full of compassion for him, and not for the first time, she wished that there was something she could do to help. She had already mentally listed the women she knew who could be potential child bearing material, but how could you approach someone and say, 'Would you have Snape's baby? You'd be doing me a huge favour because I need him to finish my apprenticeship, and it would save his life in the process?'

She could just imagine Molly Weasley's face. Molly was the most fertile person she knew and was around Snape's age. It had been a glimmer of hope for a few seconds, but she doubted that Molly, Arthur or Severus would go for it, regardless of the beneficial outcome. She had thought of another idea however, and now she just had to broach the subject with him.

After another five minutes, Snape finished writing and folded the parchment over before placing it inside an envelope. He turned to face Hermione, his lips firmly set in a grim frown.

'You will be requiring this.' He held out the envelope.

'What is it?' she asked.

'It's a letter of recommendation, Granger. I am sure you will find an adequate master to take you on.' His voice was raspy, and he sounded like he was wheezing.

Hermione felt the colour rise in her cheeks as she realised what he was saying. There was no way she was going anywhere else, not if she had any say in it.

'Thank you, sir, but it won't be necessary. I'd rather stay with you.' She sat forwards, her chin jutting out as if challenging him to argue.

Snape let out a long breath. 'I am aware that you know my circumstances, Granger, and I appreciate the sentiment.' He snorted out an ironic laugh. 'But it is not a request. I want you to leave and find another master as soon as possible.'

'No,' Hermione whispered.

Snape glared at her, his eyes flashing with something she didn't recognise. He stood abruptly and started to pace the room, anger overriding his previous distress and making him look like the Potions master she recognised, vital and masculine.

'You cannot help me, Granger,' he growled. 'I am dying.'

Hermione fought against the well of emotion that rose in her throat and wondered fleetingly at what point she had come to care so much about her professor, and if it was normal. She certainly didn't feel this way about any other teacher, but perhaps that was because she hadn't spent so much time with them. None of them had been through as much as Snape during the war, either. Perhaps it was her internal Gryffindor radar that made her want to reach out to him suddenly?

'Well, actually, sir, I did have one idea,' Hermione said softly. 'You could find a surrogate parent. There are Muggle agencies that can search out a suitable parent for your child.'

His face had been hopeful as he turned to look at her, but the light in his eyes faded and his shoulders drooped at her words. Despondent again, he sank into the sofa beside her, his head falling forwards so that his hair hid his face.

'That would not work in this instance, Miss Granger. But I thank you for giving the matter some thought,' he mumbled.

'I don't understand,' she said quietly. It had seemed like the ideal solution.

'And I cannot explain it to you, Granger.' Snape sighed and closed his eyes.

'Why not?' Hermione said, exasperated. 'The headmaster told me that you need to have a child in order to save your life! There is a way to do that!'

'For gods' sake, Granger! Do you have to involve yourself in matters that do not concern you?' he snapped.

He looked up at her through his curtain of hair and Hermione stared right back at him, not breaking his gaze. Where he had previously intimidated her, she now felt frustration.

'It does concern me, sir. I need you to be here to complete my apprenticeship. If you die, that won't happen, and I know of no other Potions master with your skills and knowledge. It has to be you,' Hermione stated firmly.

Snape stared back at her incredulously and confused Hermione when he whispered back.

'It has to be you...'

There was silence then, so palpable that Hermione felt she could hardly breathe. His eyes didn't leave her face and seemed to be memorising her features as he looked at her, his face a pale mask. Suddenly, he stood and walked into what Hermione assumed was the bedroom and then closed the door.

Severus leant his back against the bedroom door, fighting all his desires to fling it open and grab Hermione Granger in his arms. The past half an hour had been a torture to his senses, and yet she was innocent of the effect she had on him. His hand drifted down to his hard, painful erection as it pressed against the buttons of his fly. His palm flattened against the hardness, and he caressed himself softly. He could do nothing while the girl was in the other room. His orgasms were generally vocal, and he couldn't risk casting a Silencing Charm. If she chose to keep badgering him, he wouldn't hear her knock at the door, and he felt his temperature rise at the thought of Hermione Granger catching him, mid-wank, her name on his lips.

Of course, it was all Dumbledore's fault. When he learned that the girl knew, he wanted to kill the meddling old bastard where he sat behind his desk and damn the consequences. Always interfering, he had forced Severus to make a wand oath that he would not mention The Calling to Hermione. If she was to assist in the way Severus wanted and needed, it had to be of her own volition. There would be no coercion and no putting ideas into her head, and for one beautiful moment, Severus thought she had gone there herself. Her surrogate parent idea had caused him almost as much pain as taking in Nikolai's soul.

The ache between his legs was subsiding, but the ache in his chest remained. Not for the first time, Severus wondered what had come first, The Calling or his feelings for the witch. They were the same thing now, intertwined around his heart like a climbing rose, thorny and painful and tearing him apart from the inside. If this was what love felt like, he hated every minute of it.

He awoke from a fitful sleep, still clothed bar from his robes, boots and socks. It was hard to tell the time of day in the darkness of the dungeon, but the lack of natural light had always been a bonus rather than a hindrance. Not that there was any truth to the myth that vampires couldn't bear sunlight, but the skin of the Strigoi was more susceptible to the effects of the sun, and so he avoided it if at all possible. With a groan, Severus rolled himself onto his side and struggled to sit on the side of the bed. He had often wondered how his physical body would cope with two souls, and it seemed that his own weight was heavier somehow. Moving around took more effort, and he certainly wasn't as fluid or as supple as he had once been.

He ran his fingers through his lank hair and padded to the door. He needed coffee before going to speak with Dumbledore. If Granger wouldn't accept his own dismissal, he would get the old man to do it. He knew that Granger wouldn't dare ignore him, hoodwinked as she was by the soft grey hair and twinkling eyes. Snape thought he was probably the only member of the Order who knew just how manipulative and ruthless the Headmaster could be when the occasion called for it. Snape curled his lip ruefully, recalling that it had usually been at his expense. Severus walked on silent feet to his Floo, but stopped at the sound of a soft breath.

She was still there in the chair, sleeping curled up like a dormouse and covered in a deep, red blanket. He couldn't help but stare at her. At some point, she had removed the grips holding her hair, and soft curls framed her face and cascaded down her shoulders. Severus stepped closer and knelt beside her, taking in the bloom on her cheeks and the way her eyelashes curled upwards at the ends. Her mouth was parted slightly, making her Cupid's bow even more perfect, and almost unconsciously, he cupped her face gently with his hand, moving the hair away to show more of her perfect visage. He froze as Hermione let out a contented sound and pushed her cheek more firmly against his touch. As if burned, he pulled his hand away quickly, just as she opened her eyes. They stared at each other unspeaking for what seemed like forever, until Severus came to his senses rose slowly to his feet.

'Professor Snape, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep.'

Hermione pushed the blanket from her knees and shifted awkwardly to stand. As she did so, there was a soft 'thunk', and both of them stared at the book that had fallen at her feet. Hermione looked up at Severus abashed, and as he bent to pick up the book, his shoulder brushed her thigh, and she almost lost her footing. He cupped her elbow to steady her and lifted the book with his free hand. They were standing so close that he could feel her breath against his neck. When had the witch grown this tall? He forced himself to drag his eyes from hers and looked down at the book she had been reading. He had known what it was before he looked, and he snorted softly before finally turning away from her.

'Always searching for the answers,' he whispered.

'Please don't be angry, sir. I just want to help,' Hermione said, and it was hard for her to hide the emotion in her shaky voice.

Severus shuddered. The words were on the tip of tongue, but he felt the strength of the wand-oath and remained silent, cursing Dumbledore and his high bloody morals that protected the Gryffindor Princess, but never the Half-Blood Prince. He realised that knowledge was the key, and that the only way for Hermione Granger to find her way to him through choice was for her to know everything. He hadn't promised not to give her research materials, had he? He looked at the book in his hand, 'The Traditions and Heritage of Strigoi Culture,' and weighed it lightly as if considering something. He closed his eyes and thanked Macha that he had been sorted into Slytherin.

'Very well,' he murmured, as if reluctant. 'You may keep the book. It belongs to the Headmaster, and you would do well not to make him aware that you have it.' He walked slowly to his writing desk, his back turned to the witch as he distracted her with conversation.

'I would be willing to answer any question you may have, Miss Granger, once you have exhausted all lines of research, of course.' He slipped a folded sheet of parchment amongst the leaves of the book and turned back to Hermione, holding it out for her to take. He watched as she approached him tentatively and took the book, her lower lip pursed in an almost sulky pout.

'Thank you, sir.' She clutched the book to her chest, and Severus bit his tongue to hold in the moan that leapt into his throat at the sight of her perfect breasts squeezed together by her arms and the book nestled comfortably between them.

'You should leave, Granger. I have no idea of the time, but appearances should be maintained, don't you think?' He raised a suggestive eyebrow at her and felt smug as he watched the flush of her blush as the implication of his words sink in. Her eyes flashed at him suddenly, and she laughed out loud.

'That's ridiculous,' she giggled. 'I could have been brewing all night in the lab for all anyone would know.'

'Indeed. But that would not explain your dishevelled appearance. You look like you have been... ravished...' he said quietly, his tongue playing over his final word as if he were tasting honey, and he looked pointedly at her hair and creased clothing.

Hermione's hand went automatically to her hair, and she groaned as she felt the birds nest of tangled curls.

'Point taken, Professor,' she said through gritted teeth. 'It would make life so much easier if our Floos were connected. Then you could rest easy knowing that your reputation is intact.'

Severus flared at her words and closed the space between them in an instant. Hermione didn't recoil but stood even taller, the ire in her eyes almost matching his own.

'You stupid girl!' he growled. 'My reputation is already shot, and to most I am worth nothing! Your reputation, however, remains unsullied, though if you continue to associate with me, that state of being will not last long, I can assure you!'

He grabbed her shoulder to emphasise his words, and Hermione batted his hand away as if it were an insignificant fly.

'You really are a total prick, Snape. Why the hell I want to save your life is beyond me,' she shouted into his face. 'If I gave a flying fuck what other people thought of me, do you think I would have applied for an apprenticeship with you? I wanted you to teach me because I admire you, and not just because you are brilliant at potions. You put your life on the line for us... Protected us! I wouldn't be here if not for you. You mean everything!'

Hermione was shaking violently as she finished her rant, her eyes holding nothing but challenge, and Snape stared at her unspeaking until he could bear it no longer. Closing the gap between them, he wrapped his arms around her firmly and crushed his lips to hers. He felt her tense momentarily, until her lips parted and she sagged against him, moving her tongue unsurely against his. Gods, she was nectar! His nose was buried against her soft cheek, and he sighed and deepened the kiss, tasting her sweetness and losing himself in the sensual delights of her mouth. She moaned softly, her lips vibrating as she hummed her approval. They kissed urgently until Hermione squirmed to adjust the book still lodged between her breasts. Reality crashed around Severus then, and he broke their embrace as abruptly as it had started.

'Go, Granger. Just go...' he rasped before walking back into his bedroom and closing the door firmly behind him.

Hermione stared after him for a brief moment and then ran out of his chambers.

My Heart Is My Own

Chapter 8 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

It was just before four in the morning when Hermione returned to her own quarters. She lit a few candles in her bedchamber and climbed gratefully into her four-poster, wrapping the covers about herself tightly and adjusting the pillow beneath her. She stared at the shadows thrown by the flickering candlelight and tried to ignore the aching pain in her gut. Her tears had stopped before she had reached her door, and luckily she hadn't encountered anyone wandering the draughty halls. The only person she might have expected to meet at that hour would have been Snape, and she knew exactly where he was.

Her mind was a blur of confused thoughts, but it was the kiss that she couldn't stop thinking about. Her lips still tingled at the memory of his mouth against hers, and she closed her eyes and ran her tongue across them to see if she could still taste him. She had never been kissed like that before in her life, but what surprised her more was the total rightness of it. Surely, she should feel shock and disgust? She hadn't even stopped to ask herself why it had happened, because it seemed so inevitable.

Hermione had never believed in fate. It belonged in a dusty box along with Divination and all of Professor Trelawney's gibberish, as far as she was concerned. She didn't believe in soul mates, either. How stupid to think that there was only one person intended for another? Hermione's own parents, while well matched in many ways, were most definitely not soul mates. In fact, Hermione had often analysed their relationship and thought about the lack of common ground they shared, rather than what held them together. So why she had felt so complete when being kissed by her Potions master was beyond her understanding.

With a sigh, Hermione accepted she wouldn't sleep, so she sat up and reached for the Headmaster's book. It fell open at a page that seemed to be marked, and she took out the sheet of parchment and started to read.

'... arranged marriage. The compatibility process is designed to ensure a suitable match that will have a satisfactory outcome for both parties and result in the required offspring before the female spouse is turned. Should more than one child be desired, this will be taken into account before the binding ceremony and included in the commitment contract. The compatibility questionnaire should allow for this as a pre-cursor to more detailed discussion between the matches...'

Something niggled at Hermione about this passage, but she turned the page, eager to understand more of Snape's culture. Perhaps his personality was also a Strigoi trait?

'Some would say that the tradition of arranged marriage is outdated. However, for those with Strigoi blood, it is a necessity not purely borne out of making a good match, but for the sake of the long-term survival of the line. For Strigoi males, marriage could truly be a matter of life or death...'

Hermione nodded. That was certainly the case for Snape.

'.. therefore, it is imperative that a marriage takes place. The strength of the bond between the male Strigoi and the female match is such that, once mated, it remains for eternity. For a male to bond with an un-matched female without the contract of marriage, and the commitment to bear offspring that goes with this, would surely mean death.'

'Bloody hell,' Hermione muttered. No wonder Snape balked at the idea of surrogacy! It would have been a second death sentence to him. But why hadn't he told her? Hermione closed the book and let her fingers run over the embossed cover. There was so much she didn't understand, so many gaps in her knowledge, and all of her inane babbling about wanting to help Snape seemed like so much childish chatter now. He must think her ridiculously naive.

She reached for the folded parchment and was about to replace it in the book when she noticed that it had writing on it. Curious, she opened it and realised that it was a letter addressed to Dumbledore. He must have used it to mark his place in the book, Hermione mused, and she thought twice about reading what must be private correspondence. She quickly put her worries to one side. Dumbledore was not to know she had read the book, therefore he wouldn't know that she had read the letter, either. Lifting the parchment, she read through it, her eyes narrowing as she digested the contents. Flicking through the relevant chapters in the book, she found no references to The Calling referred to in the letter. She was sure the letter was about Snape, because there were no other Strigoi at the school as far as she knew.

Apparently, Snape had already fixed his attentions to a suitable mate, so why all the drama about finding a wife to bear his child? He rarely went out, which meant it was someone at the school. Thinking it would most likely be one of the other professors, Hermione mentally ran through a list of the current teaching staff and whittled the choices down to Professor Sinistra and Professor Bradley, Muggle Studies teacher and the newest and youngest member of staff. The thought of Professor Snape with either of them seemed odd and made her feel more than uncomfortable for some reason.

Hermione read through the letter once more and frowned suddenly. If Professor Snape was under the influence of The Calling and had already attached himself to a female within the school, why had he kissed her? Or was it she that had kissed him? She closed her eyes and ran through the kiss yet again, feeling a warm glow at the memory of his lips and firm arms encircling her.

A very frightening and shocking thought hit her, and she scrambled from the bed to put quill to paper. If her assumption was right, she needed more information, and she needed it yesterday.

Snape was well used to surviving on little or no sleep, which was a good thing given the circumstances. With his eyes open or closed, all he could see was Hermione's face as he moved in to touch her lips with his.

He felt a slight hint of smugness that kissing Hermione Granger had not contravened the guidelines of his wand oath, and the devil in him wondered how far he would have to go with her for it to be considered coercion. The other side of him felt damned to hell for acting on his base instincts, but surely he could be forgiven? The witch was so

open, so innocent in her wish to help, expecting no reward save for his continued presence in her life. He had been overwhelmed by her and wished that he could be as selfless.

He showered, ignoring his penis as it bobbed eagerly beneath the spray. Responding to his need for physical release only made him want Hermione more. His hand was not what he needed. Once clean and slightly more alert, he chose freshly laundered clothes and made sure each button was shining and equally aligned with its neighbour. He took extra care with his hair and didn't stop to wonder why he was making so much effort to look his best.

In the lab, he took time to inspect the working area. She had been here alone when he was in the hospital wing, and as he ran his supple fingers over the spotless workbench, he imagined her at work, thin rivulets of sweat on her brow, stray tendrils of hair clinging to her slim, creamy throat.

He paused on hearing her approach and stood up straight as she entered.

'Granger,' he said, aiming for the middle ground between desperate love-hungry Strigoi and intelligent, composed Potions master. He noticed her jump before regaining her composure, schooling her face into that of the student.

'Good morning, Professor Snape.'

Severus watched her as she walked immediately to the cauldron shelf and lifted his smallest silver cauldron, placing it on the workbench in front of her. She was studiously avoiding his gaze, and he thought they were to work in silence, until she spoke.

'May I ask a favour, sir?' She looked up at him with a hint of wariness, and Severus wondered if he should mention their earlier kiss to break the awkwardness. The witch was here, however. Surely that meant she wasn't put off by him?

'You may,' he replied.

'Could I perhaps borrow Dante? I need to send some personal mail, but I would rather keep it private. If I go to the Owlery, Mr. Filch will be watching, and he can be a terrible old gossip.' Her lips quirked into a wry smile, and he chuckled softly. He wondered how many other students had noticed the extra-curricular activities of the caretaker.

'I had thought you a bit afraid of Dante, but you may use him. If he will let you, of course,' he said, raising his eyebrow at her.

Hermione reached her hand into her pocket and withdrew a fat and very dead mouse. 'Crookshanks provided some bribery. He wasn't happy at parting with it, but I assured him it was important.'

'Almost Slytherin of you,' he murmured. He felt his stomach clench at the tinkle of her laughter ringing around the lab and smiled despite himself.

He watched as Hermione opened the door of his chambers and called the bird to her and felt proud of her confidence as she held her arm out for the jackdaw to land on. He was an incredibly large and ugly bird, and not for the first time, Snape felt a kinship to him as Dante allowed the witch to scratch the top of his head. It would seem they were both smitten. She fastened a tightly scrolled parchment to Dante's leg and gave him the mouse, which he took far more carefully than he would have done if Snape had been offering it.

'Traitor,' Snape muttered.

'He's quite sweet really,' she said as he flew off.

'Never judge a book by its cover, Granger,' he said quietly as he started to gather ingredients for his own brewing.

'That's very good advice, sir,' she said amiably, and he could have sworn she was trying to hide a grin as she returned to the workbench.

'I shall require silence while I work, if you think you can manage that,' he muttered, annoyed with himself for letting her ruffle his composure by simply existing.

'I don't think that will be a problem, sir,' she replied, and Severus was sure he caught a lilt of amusement in her voice. He glared at her, and she dropped her sparkling gaze to concentrate on her potion.

Hermione felt strangely buoyant as she finished cleaning the lab. She had expected to feel exhausted, but her mind had been active as she brewed, and she hadn't had the time to consider the needs of her body. She realised that she hadn't eaten, and neither had Professor Snape. One benefit of having him kiss her was that she no longer felt intimidated by him. In fact, the impish part of her wanted to engage him in banter, as she would have done with Harry or Ron, and she had to remind herself he was still her teacher first and a man second.

'I think that we should eat, sir,' she said quietly. His potion was bubbling madly and creating a pall of steam that almost obscured her view of him. He looked up at her and nodded.

'Indeed, Granger. Go through and ask the house-elves to send something up. I shall be there momentarily.'

Hermione smiled at him and went through to his living room. She used the Floo and asked the elves to send up what ever Professor Snape particularly liked and was surprised when a small roast beef dinner and a half-portion of sticky toffee pudding appeared on the low coffee table, alongside her own salmon and vegetables and fresh fruit salad. She placed a stasis charm over the food and went to browse the bookshelf while she waited for Snape. She didn't know how long she had been looking at his books, but a cough interrupted her thoughts, and she turned away quickly, shrugging as if she had been well and truly caught out.

'I was just looking,' she said by way of explanation.

'As I knew you would,' he smirked at her.

They both sat at the same time and ate in silence, both of them silently acknowledging that they were hungrier than they had thought. Hermione's eyes flicked up as Snape withdrew a dark vial from his pocket and drank from it quickly before placing it back in his pocket. She shivered involuntarily and wondered just what blood tasted like in such quantities.

'Disgusted, Granger?' he asked her sharply.

'No, sir.' She answered quickly, not wanting to spoil the camaraderie that seemed to have developed between them. 'Just curious. You did say I could ask you some questions, didn't you?'

'If you will allow me to finish my dessert before the inquisition?' He looked at her and his eyes held a mixture of resignation and amusement.

'Of course. As long as there is no limit to the number of questions,' she responded.

They locked eyes, and Hermione smiled at him brilliantly. Snape groaned and nodded, then lifted his spoon and began to eat. Slowly.

If I Love You, What Business Is It Of Yours?

Chapter 9 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

The room was filled with a warm glow from the fire and candles in scones around the room. Hermione curled herself into the armchair, feeling contentedly well fed. She also felt surprisingly at ease with her professor, who had removed his teaching robes and unfastened the numerous buttons on his jacket, revealing a pristine, white shirt, with a high collar that covered the scarring on his neck. She hadn't realised that she was staring until he spoke.

'You may ask, Granger,' he said quietly, his cool gaze levelled at her.

'Why didn't you die? After the bite, I mean?' She remembered the event vividly and had always wondered why the venom did not affect him as it should have.

Snape subconsciously adjusted the collar before speaking. 'I am Strigoi. We are immune in ways that humans are not.' He didn't elaborate, and Hermione didn't press further. She knew this was a privilege not many students would get.

Her brow furrowed in thought for a second and her eyes widened. 'Voldemort didn't know you were Strigoi, did he? How on earth did you hide that from him?'

Snape smirked. 'I was a spy, Granger. The Dark Lord knew only what I chose to tell him.'

'Well, thank goodness, otherwise he would have found a different method of killing you,' she said with feeling.

'And made many people happy in the process, no doubt,' he murmured, staring blankly into the flickering flames.

'I don't know why you always do that,' she retorted. 'There are people who care about you, but you always think the worst!'

'Name them,' he whispered with a glint in his eye as his face turned to hers.

'Well...' Hermione stammered. 'Dumbledore cares about you.'

'What Dumbledore feels is guilt, Granger. Nothing more or less than that.' His mouth twitched. 'Next?'

'Harry,' she stated firmly. 'He has always respected you for what you did for him, for all of us. He knows that you cared for his mother, too.'

'Memories can be modified, Granger. The memory I gave to Potter was a fabrication. I knew Lily Evans, certainly, and it is true that we were friends before Hogwarts. But I was never in love with her.' He smiled briefly.

'But... Harry was sure that you loved her! He still thinks that!' Hermione exclaimed.

'And you will not tell him otherwise, Granger. You did read the book, I assume? I am sure you can draw your own conclusions.' He stretched his legs out in front of him and slouched lazily on the sofa.

'Strigoi bond for life...' she said quietly, her mind a whirr as she tried to assimilate this new information.

'If I had bonded with Potter's mother, I would not be in such a predicament now.'

Hermione clasped her hands together and started to twist the plain silver ring on her finger that her parents had given her one Christmas. If Snape hadn't really loved Lily Evans, how much more of his life story was false? She was intrigued and perplexed, and more and more questions were being added to her already long list.

'Didn't your uncle have children, sir?'

'He had two sons. They both died in circumstances I was never party to, within months of each other. It devastated Nikolai, and I wonder if it wasn't that which made him care so much. He was the father I never had, in the end.' Snape's voice became rough, and he stood abruptly. He walked to the bookshelf and tipped forward the edge of a dark-bound tome. A shelf slid out below, revealing a cleverly disguised cabinet containing bottles of liquor and glasses. He poured two glasses of a dark amber liquid and took a deep sip of his drink before handing the second glass to Hermione.

'Honey mead. It will do you no harm,' he murmured at Hermione's questioning gaze.

'What happened to your own father?' Hermione asked.

'Nothing that is relevant to this discussion,' he said sharply. 'I thought you wanted to know more of Strigoi culture, not pry into my private affairs.'

'I do... Sorry. I just find it all so interesting.' Hermione sipped the mead and felt the warmth of the alcohol slip down her throat as she revelled in the sweetness on her tongue. 'Mmm, that's delicious.'

'My own blend,' he said with a soft sigh.

'Sir,' Hermione said, turning the conversation onto what she hoped were less emotive topics. 'Do you ever take fresh blood, you know, as opposed to your regular supply?' She sat forward in her chair now, because this was something that fascinated her. She wondered what Snape would look like biting someone's throat and drinking their blood and found the idea grimly thrilling for some strange reason.

'You mean do I feed from a living blood source?' His eyes glittered at her, and his mouth curved upwards in a slow, sensual smile. 'On occasion, I do. It has more nutrients, and the chase can be as satisfying as the meal, I find. Female blood is always preferable.' He drifted off, but Hermione didn't miss the flick of his eyes to her exposed throat, and she gasped and sat back in the chair. Did he want to bite her?

'What happens to the women you feed from?' she asked faintly.

'Nothing happens. I heal them, Obliviate the memory, replace it with another one and leave them to their business.'

'So, they don't turn into vampires?' Hermione asked.

'I prefer the term Strigoi, Granger. No human is turned by a Strigoi feeding from them. Turning is complicated and irreversible. The only female I will ever turn will be my wife.' He paused and gritted his teeth lightly. 'But only if she agrees.'

Hermione watched Snape as he removed his jacket and unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt collar. He looked tired, and as she looked at the clock in shock, she saw it was almost midnight.

'It's so late! I should go before I get caught leaving the dungeon in the early hours like the last time,' she said, standing slowly and stretching her limbs.

'I have resolved that issue, Granger. I had our Floos connected, as you suggested.'

He looked up at her from his sprawled position on the sofa, and Hermione felt a lump in her throat as she looked at his long, firm legs and the sinewy muscles of his chest beneath his shirt. The firelight cast a warm tinge onto his skin, and he looked almost indecent with his long hair around his open collar and the amused glint in his eye. She felt suddenly hot and turned towards the Floo in order to escape before giving in the sudden urge to kiss him this time.

She grabbed a handful of Floo powder and was about to throw it into the hearth, but paused with her back to him.

'You could add me to the list of people who care about you, sir.' She spoke softly, not sure if he had heard her, and Flooed away before he had chance to respond.

Snape was becoming impatient. It had been almost three days since his late-night conversation with the witch, and there had been no further opportunities for cosy chats due to his teaching schedule. In addition, Dante had still not returned from his delivery of Granger's letter. He would never admit to being fond of the bedraggled creature, but they had been companions for the past five years, and he was often the only company Severus had during the war.

He finished his last class of the day early, smugly overseeing the exodus of Ravenclaw first years as they scrambled to leave his presence and start their weekend thirty minutes early. As soon as the last student had left, he did a cursory clean of the classroom and departed to his own personal lab to catch Granger before her shift ended. He hoped there might be a chance to see her in a less formal capacity over the weekend and had thought of the perfect ruse.

He walked into the lab swiftly and was gratified when Granger looked up from a stack of books and flashed a warm smile at him. He nodded a greeting, fighting the urge to look pleased to see her.

'Have you plans for the weekend, Granger?' he said flatly.

'Well, I was thinking of going to the Burrow. I haven't seen Ginny or Harry since their engagement, and I have a gift, but I want to give it in person rather than owl it,' she said.

'I need to gather ingredients tomorrow night and could use some assistance, but if you have already made plans, it's no matter.' He tried and failed to keep the disappointment from his voice, and, realising he sounded like a petulant child, he turned to go into his quarters.

'I can help you, sir. I don't plan on going until Sunday afternoon.' She smiled at him again, and he gave up the pretence and gave her a small smile in return.

'Very good. I shall meet you at the main doors at a quarter to midnight. Don't be late, Granger.'

'You can call me Hermione, if you want to, sir,' she called after him.

Snape grinned to himself. So far, so good.

All plans for the weekend went out of the window after Hermione received a reply to her letter. Dante had returned, exhausted, in the early hours of Saturday morning, looking more bedraggled and threadbare than ever. Snape was furious, and without pre-ambles, he walked through the Floo and into Hermione's quarters.

She woke with a start at the sound of the rushing flames, grabbed her wand and pulled her bedclothes over her thin vest and shorts pyjama set.

'What the hell are you doing?' she shouted.

'I could ask you the same thing! You almost killed my bird, you silly chit!' Severus paced back and forth, seemingly unaware of the inappropriateness of his presence in her bedchamber.

'Oh! Is he back?' Hermione forgot her state of undress and hopped out of bed to grab the letter that Snape held out to her, but to her chagrin, he held it beyond her reach.

'Where the bloody blazes did you send him, Granger?' Severus's nerve was jumping in his temple, and Hermione realised she hadn't seen him this angry in a long time.

'Well, Romania actually. Goodness, is he alright? I thought he would be able to manage the journey with no problem.' Hermione bit her lip in obvious concern.

'He is an old bird,' Snape said with a sigh, his anger dissipating quickly. 'He is also routinely attacked by the owls. He was too exhausted to escape them, this time.'

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. 'Oh, no... I'm so sorry.' She placed her hand on his arm, and he looked at her as if she were some weird creature he had just discovered beneath a slimy rock. His lip curled into a sneer.

'Gryffindor sentimentality. He is not dead, Granger, just shell-shocked and of no use to anyone,' he said slowly, his eyes drifting down and taking in her nightwear for the first time. Hermione stood her ground, mainly because he still had her letter and to annoy him might mean he would disappear with it still clutched in his slim-fingered fist.

'Rabbits?' he said with a smirk.

'A gift from my mother,' she said tersely. 'May I have my letter?' Hermione held his gaze and tried to ignore the tightening of her nipples and the fact he could most likely see them through the fabric of the vest.

Snape held the letter between them, pretending not to notice as his knuckles brushed the top of her bare shoulder. Hermione shivered and plucked the letter from him quickly, then scuttled back to the safety of her bed.

'I'll see you tonight, sir. I really am very sorry about Dante,' she said quietly, wishing fervently that he would just leave. He nodded once, and did just that, leaving Hermione to let out a long breath.

'Bugger it,' she hissed to herself. He made her so flustered, she could hardly think straight. Turning her attention to the letter, she opened it quickly. Her eyes scanned the contents carefully, and two pink spots appeared in her cheeks as her thoughts were confirmed in writing.

'Oh, gods...' she whispered.

Believe That We Alone Can Love

Chapter 10 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Severus shrugged his thick outdoor coat over his narrow shoulders and gathered the basket and dragon-hide gloves. His mood was no longer buoyant after his note from Granger. She claimed to have a head cold and apologised for not being able to assist him, but he still had ingredients to harvest, with or without her help. He had sent a terse reply back, along with a vial of Pepperup potion should she choose to use it. He wasn't angry as much as disappointed. He was also slightly frustrated with himself. His first instinct had been to walk straight through his Floo and spend the evening tending her ill health, but she would have thought him quite mad, so he resisted. Even so, he was taking his own sweet time in leaving the castle. A large part of him had no desire to be anywhere Granger wasn't.

With a disgruntled grunt, he slammed the dungeon door and trudged along the dark corridor. As he rounded a bend he heard giggling and rustling behind a tapestry-covered alcove. Without preamble, he drew back the tapestry with his wand, revealing a half-dressed Ravenclaw girl who looked like she had been well and truly kissed, and a sallow-faced Slytherin, who smirked down at the pretty girl and ignored Severus in his belief that nothing bad would happen.

'Twenty points from Slytherin, Caldecott, for not being more discreet,' he rumbled. 'Thirty points from Ravenclaw, Miss Hayes, for not having better taste.'

His face was thunder, and deep down he knew that his wrath was not solely fuelled by misbehaving students. He did feel better for venting, however, and as he watched the chastened pair running away from him, he smirked and glanced back at the alcove. A flash of Granger's smooth limbs entwined around his waist as he leaned her against the rough stone walls entered his mind unbidden, and with a scowl, he continued his journey with more determination to put such thoughts from his head.

As he left the castle at a brisk pace, the cool wind whipped his hair behind him and caught the edge of his coat, causing it to billow and fly behind him. He had no idea that he looked like a dark angel on a mission, and that from her vantage point in the Astronomy tower, a certain witch was watching him with a sense of awe and apprehension.

The following day was Sunday, but Severus was not one for lounging in bed. He was up early after a surprisingly good night's sleep. Perhaps the fresh air last night had done the trick. He browsed his bookshelf, ready to settle in his armchair for a good read before lunch, but his plans were annoyingly interrupted by the bane of his very existence.

'Ah, Severus, there you are.' Dumbledore sounded cheerful, which in Severus's experience was never a good sign.

'Where else,' he murmured at the headmaster, whose head was sticking out of Severus' Floo.

'Come through, Severus. I have good news.' With a nod of his head, he disappeared, and Severus swore under his breath. If the old man had been plotting again, he would hex him into next week.

In the headmaster's office, Dumbledore sat in his usual place behind his desk, but Severus immediately noticed two chairs in front of it and quirked his eyebrow at him.

'Expecting someone else?' he asked.

'All in good time, my boy. Please, take a seat. Would like tea?' He proffered the teapot in Severus's direction, but he shook his head.

'Get to the point, Albus. I have things to do.' He folded his arms across his chest.

'Very well.' Dumbledore paused and smiled widely. 'I have received a response in my search for a match. There is someone willing to bond with you, Severus.'

Severus stared at Dumbledore as if he were speaking a foreign language. A match? Someone was willing to bond. With him. A cold sense of fear gripped his stomach.

'No,' he hissed.

'But, Severus, you haven't met her yet!' Dumbledore said incredulously.

'You know I cannot, Albus,' he said beseechingly. 'Please, give me more time to...'

'I will not.' Dumbledore said seriously. 'I know how you feel about certain things, but I must insist that you at least meet her. It would be impolite of you not to. If you think the match unsuitable afterwards, then we can wait a while longer, if you so choose.'

Severus closed his eyes and sighed. 'Fine,' he said resignedly. He knew that he had no good argument, and there was certain propriety in these matters.

'Excellent!' Dumbledore clapped his hands together happily and his eyes twinkled so brightly that Severus thought he could quite possibly be intoxicated. 'You can reveal yourself, my dear.'

Severus stared at him in horror. The conniving bastard had concealed his potential mate, and she had quite probably overheard the whole damn conversation! His face flushed as he sat straighter in his chair and self-consciously combed through his hair with his fingers. His eyes almost fell out of his head, however, when Hermione Granger walked nervously around the pillar that had been her hiding place and smiled at him.

'Hello, sir,' she said quietly.

Severus looked from her face to Dumbledore, who looked like the cat who had the cream. He nodded in affirmation, and Severus let out a long breath and relaxed into his chair, relief sweeping over him, his feelings overwhelming him and the desire to take the witch immediately to a certain alcove causing a tightening sensation in his nether regions.

'I should congratulate the both of you, if I am not too ahead of myself,' Dumbledore said with undisguised happiness. Severus bit back a bark of laughter as Dumbledore stood and soundly kissed a stunned Granger on her cheek.

'Severus, perhaps you could take Miss Granger through to your rooms. I am sure it would be more comfortable to talk there.'

Severus nodded and stood, gesturing to Hermione to go ahead of him through the Floo. He refused to acknowledge Dumbledore as he stepped into the hearth. No doubt, he would be itching to share the news with Minerva, and they would gossip about them like a pair of old hens, but no matter.

He stepped into his sitting room and turned to look at Granger, who was sitting on the edge of the sofa and eyeing him uncertainly. She seemed to have dressed for the

occasion, in a soft pink jumper and a far too tight pair of denim jeans, and her hair was around her shoulders in soft, undulating waves.

'I think you have finally lost your mind, Granger,' he said blandly, fighting the urge to shout out his overwhelming joy at her decision.

'I don't think so, sir. You see...' She paused and he sat beside her. She looked sideways at him as if afraid to divulge something, but her confidence won out. 'I know about The Calling.'

Severus felt the colour drain from his cheeks, and a shiver ran through him. He realised that the Unbreakable Vow had lifted, and Granger must have noticed it too because she shivered slightly and frowned. She looked into his face with concern.

'That was an Unbreakable Vow, wasn't it? Did Dumbledore make you do that?' There was a hint of anger in her voice, and Severus wondered what had triggered it.

'Indeed. He wished you to come to your decision without coercion,' he said quietly, still not believing she would actually go through with it.

'That was incredibly cruel of him. Didn't he know how painful it would be for you to suffer The Calling and not act on it?' Her eyes flashed, and she stood up, pacing the room slowly.

'Painful?' Severus stared at the witch, aware that in moments their roles had changed and suddenly, she was the one with the knowledge.

'According to my research, if a Strigoi does not act on The Calling, the pull grows stronger, and denial of the urges can cause excruciating pain in... well, certain areas...' She stopped, suddenly realising who she was speaking to, and sat back down on the sofa without looking at him.

Overwhelmed with the ridiculousness of the situation, Severus started to laugh. Granger looked sideways at him and couldn't help but smile. His laughter was infectious, and she began to giggle too, until their eyes met and the laughter faded. She smiled at him warmly.

'Can I ask you a question, sir?'

Severus couldn't stop a smile. 'Now and for the rest of my sorry existence, most likely,' he said.

'Did I pass the apprenticeship exam fairly, or did you fix it so I would get the position?'

Her face mirrored genuine concern that she hadn't got the place on her own merits, and knowing what she did now, he couldn't blame her for doubting him. Deep down, Severus knew that if she hadn't passed, he would have fudged it and let her in anyway.

'A fair question,' he said, running his hands through his hair. He had often imagined what their coming together might look like. This had not been one of the scenarios. 'You passed fair and square, naturally.'

'And if I hadn't?' Hermione narrowed her eyes, and Severus knew without a doubt he would never be able to lie to this witch, so he didn't even try.

'I would have altered the papers accordingly. I didn't need to, Granger. You can test the papers yourself to see if they have been tampered with.' Severus was starting to feel miserable. He was blotting his copybook with her, and they hadn't even got to second base. If things continued like this, she would most likely change her mind.

'I trust you, sir,' Hermione said with a rueful smile. 'The compatibility questions had nothing to do with working together, did they?'

'Draco's did. Yours were... different,' he admitted, suddenly feeling as if he had been totally out of line. 'It was not my intention to deceive, Granger.'

'I understand, sir. In fact, I spent last night drawing up my own compatibility questions. According to Strigoi tradition, we're both expected to fill them in and compare notes, am I right?' She had the nerve to smirk at him as she pulled out a sheet of folded parchment from her jeans pocket.

Severus groaned. 'Of all the witches...' he murmured, taking the parchment from her as she laughed lightly. He scanned the questions and was about to protest when she spoke again.

'I know some of the questions are personal, sir, but if we're going to do this, I have to be sure. I never do anything without committing myself fully, and I always imagined... Well, if we are to be married, I would like us to be happily so.'

Severus looked at her with admiration. She was seriously considering being his mate, and if it was within his power to make that happen, he would do it, even if it meant answering all of her questions. He was still looking at her when he realised that she was also looking at him, and that there were only a few inches of sofa cushion between them. His eyes automatically dropped to her lips, and his heart started to beat faster. Knowing that the witch knew about The Calling meant he no longer had to hide the way he was drawn to her, and he took a length of her soft hair in his hand. Bringing it to his nose, he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, enraptured.

'Severus,' she whispered. He opened his eyes quickly and found she was now leaning closer to him, with her eyes staring into his. It took a while to register that she had spoken his name, and he smiled slowly.

'Hermione,' he replied smoothly.

'Would you like to kiss me before I go?' she asked hoarsely.

It seemed he was not the only one affected by desire. His mouth went dry, and he felt inarticulate and clumsy, like a teenager on his first date. He nodded, and she let out a small whimper of approval. Without giving him time to think about anything, she closed the gap between their lips, and he felt her hand, small and warm as she threaded her fingers through his. There was something incredibly tender and innocent about it, so different to their first passion-fuelled encounter, and Severus felt a lump rise in his throat as his thin lips met hers. Gentle and tentative, Hermione moved her mouth against his, and he teased her open with his tongue. She moaned quietly and he resisted her efforts to deepen the kiss. Instead, he threaded his free hand through her hair, cradling her face with his palm. He caressed her lips with his for far longer than he had ever dreamed of. Reluctantly pulling back, he rested his forehead against hers as they caught their breath and then kissed her once more quickly before moving away. He didn't release her hand, however.

'I fear I will not be in control of myself should we do this too often,' he said in explanation.

Hermione nodded her understanding and blushed at the implication of his words.

'I think we should wait, at least, until we have compared the compatibility questions and made the final decision,' she said softly. Severus couldn't help but notice her eyes had a slightly dreamy look, and he wondered for the first time just how often she had been kissed.

Hermione caressed his fingers with hers and then let his hand fall as she stood to leave. She paused at the Floo and flashed him a smile, then stepped into the hearth. Once she had gone, Severus had to fight the urge to follow her immediately, just to be in her company.

'It will come soon enough,' he said.

Hermione's emotions were all over the place when she returned to her rooms. Severus' kisses were intoxicating, and her head was swimming. Viktor had tried to kiss her with what passed for passion in Bulgaria, but her lips had been bruised and sore and she had avoided being that close to him after the Yule Ball. Ron kissed like a fish, open-mouthed and wet. Once was enough that time, too. But Severus' kisses...

'Gods...' she whispered, feeling herself flush at the memory of his tongue against hers. She marched quickly to her bathroom and turned on the shower. She had to freshen up before going to the Burrow, and putting some space between herself and the man who had her so flustered.

Quickly undressing, she stepped under the warm water, and as she washed herself, her mind went through the events of the morning. What she had done was life-changing, of that there was no doubt, and when she had first approached Dumbledore to offer herself to Snape, she had almost changed her mind at the last moment. It was the letter from Gabriel Thantos that pushed her through the door in the end. She had written to him posing as a research student interested in Strigoi culture, with particular interest in a vague reference she had uncovered to something named 'the Calling'. It had been a deception of sorts, but he had responded quickly and enthusiastically. He had been more than graphic about the physical effects of the syndrome, and Hermione wondered if Snape had needed to, well, relieve himself. It wouldn't work in the long-term, according to Thantos. Rather, it just increased the need for the woman the Strigoi was called to, which would lead to the worst-case scenario. No release, leading to madness from which the male would never recover.

Once Hermione had read this, any arguments she may have had for ignoring Snape's plight went out of the window. She had never thought to marry and have children so young, but there were advantages to getting it done now rather than having to stop in the middle of her career and start all over again.

Hermione felt a sudden spike of anger towards Albus Dumbledore. She knew just how manipulative the old bugger really was, and she felt a pang as she wondered just how many times he had used Severus in the past. If he had been able to tell her about the Calling, they would be married by now and on the way to saving his life.

Hermione stepped out of the shower with renewed resolve and grinned as she thought of Severus, bent over her parchment and writing his answers to her questions in his spiky scrawl. It was cruel of her really, because she had already made up her mind to go though with it, compatibility questions or no.

The more she thought about it, the more she convinced herself that being married to Snape wouldn't be such a bad thing. If they ran out of things to talk about, he could just kiss her to fill the time.

Are You Beautiful Because I Love You?

Chapter 11 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Severus braved breakfast in the Great Hall and regretted it almost as soon as he sat down, thanks to the arrival of the post owls. He had hoped that sticking to his usual routine would distract him from other, more pressing matters (how to get Hermione Granger in a more compromising position being the most pressing of all). He had successfully ignored the pointed looks from Minerva and Albus and was just about to tuck in to his usual half-breakfast of bacon, egg and toast, when a cream envelope landed on the table between himself and Professor Flitwick, and they reached for it simultaneously. Flitwick, being closer to the tabletop, Severus presumed, managed to snatch it and read who it was addressed to before him.

'Severus? Why on earth would Hermione Granger be writing to you, when you keep her locked in your stuffy dungeon day in and day out?' Flitwick handed him the envelope reluctantly, and his lips twitched in amusement. 'Is the poor girl scared to speak?'

'Hilarious as always, Filius. No doubt when I open my mail later, all will be revealed,' he responded silkily, as if it were quite normal to receive mail from his apprentice.

He slipped the envelope into his inside pocket, his own curiosity burning a hole in his seat in his eagerness to read her note, but he wouldn't give his colleagues the satisfaction of rushing away too soon. The wait was almost as torturous as the banter that began to fly thanks to Flitwick's less-than-quiet announcement.

With feigned languor, Snape finished his meal, although he no longer tasted it, and then pushed his chair away from the table slowly. He took a slow walk via the Slytherin table and made a half-hearted attempt at a steely glare intended to keep his students in line, then he stepped into the hallway, letting the doors close behind him, and let out a breath of relief. He increased his pace and slipped into the tapestry-curtained alcove, withdrew his wand and Hermione's note, and whispered 'Lumos'.

'Dear Severus,

I hope you don't mind me addressing you informally when discussing personal matters? Obviously, I will behave formally in company.

I would like to invite you to dinner this evening. We shouldn't waste any more time, and I thought it might be beneficial to discuss things away from Hogwarts.

I have booked a table at The Crooked Wand in Hogsmeade for 8 p.m. I know the owner and have requested a private booth.

Please let me know if this suits you,

Yours,

Hermione'

Severus smirked at the nerve of the girl. Surely, as the man, he should be the one inviting her to dinner? But then, he hadn't even thought of it, and he realised wryly that she seemed to be courting him. Something pricked his ego, and he strode down to the dungeon intent on redressing the balance.

She was brewing, as he knew she would be. She looked up as he entered the lab, and as he walked over to her, he thought he saw her shudder slightly.

'Miss Granger,' he said smoothly. 'I received your note this morning at breakfast, much to the intrigue and delight of my gossipy colleagues.'

Hermione flushed but held his gaze. 'I thought you would be here, sir. I apologise if I caused you any embarrassment.'

Severus looked down at her until the weight of his gaze made her look away.

'I have classes to teach,' he said softly, 'but I will meet you at The Crooked Wand as arranged.'

She didn't respond, so he tipped her chin upwards so that she had no choice but to look at him. Her eyes seemed watery, and he felt a slight twinge of guilt. Relenting, he kissed her briefly and caressed her cheek with his fingertips before leaving her to her tasks.

Hermione sat in the cosy booth at The Crooked Wand and hoped that she wasn't over dressed. She rarely had the chance to wear dresses, and the turquoise silk creation had sat in her wardrobe for over a year just waiting for the right occasion. Her first proper date with her intended seemed like the right time, and she had applied a little make up and pinned her hair in an elegant chignon at the base of her neck. She hadn't seen Severus since his brief visit to the lab, and it had left her a little off-balance to say the least. One minute he had seemed annoyed, and then he had kissed her so tenderly, it was as if he were two different people.

Hermione's eyes flicked towards the door as Severus entered, and as she raised her hand to show him where she was, her stomach flipped. He had obviously decided to treat this as a date, too. His silky hair was caught in a black ribbon, and he was wearing his dress robes over a tailored jacket in bottle green. Hermione had never seen him in any colour but black or white, and she found herself gazing at him as he was led to the booth by the waitress. He murmured his thanks and slipped into the seat before her, bending lightly to kiss Hermione's cheek as before sitting.

'You look amazing,' she breathed, her eyes wide as he slipped off his outer robes and adjusted his cuffs. He looked at her and smirked.

'You look very lovely too, Hermione. I don't recall seeing you in that colour before. It suits you,' he said, his rich voice vibrating deliciously down Hermione's spine. 'That reminds me. I have a gift for you.'

'Oh, Severus.' Hermione's voice trembled softly. He seemed so self-assured, and it was a side of him she had never experienced. She felt her eyes fill with tears as he passed a small silver box over to her and opened it so she could see the contents.

Nestled against the inner velvet of the box was an oval filigree pendant of fine silver, backed with a thin sliver of a gemstone Hermione didn't recognise. She lifted it carefully and examined it under the candlelight.

'It's very beautiful, Severus. Thank you,' she said with a smile. She unfastened the catch and caught him watching her, his dark eyes flashing with what she now recognised as his need for her. 'Would you put it on for me?'

Hermione slipped from the booth and stood beside him, and he twisted in his seat, taking the delicate necklace in his hands and placing it onto her smooth, creamy neck. His fingers caressed her skin, and Hermione stifled a moan. His aura was magnetic this night, and she wondered if The Calling felt something like this, but stronger.

'Done,' he said softly. She turned to show him, and he lifted the pendant in his hand gently and looked into her eyes. 'It was my Mother's, of course. It looks beautiful on you, too. The stone changes colour to match whatever you are wearing. Look'. He tipped the pendant towards her, and Hermione gasped at the sparkling turquoise stone behind the silver knot work.

'Thank you, Severus. I'll treasure it,' she said meaningfully. Feeling suddenly brave, she kissed him on the lips softly before returning to her side of the table, just in time for them to give their orders to the waitress.

After the initial awkwardness, conversation flowed between them quite well, and the glass of wine Severus pressed into her hand did the job of relaxing her enough to forget her nerves. Once they had finished dessert, they both recognised the need to get down to the task in hand, albeit reluctantly. Sharing secret looks across the table was so much more fun.

'I took the liberty of bringing both sets of questions and answers. You should consider teaching, Hermione. You are a hard taskmaster.' He chuckled as he handed over the answers to her questions.

'I learned from the best.' She laughed and winked at him cheekily, making him chuckle yet again. He found her company beguiling, and she seemed more beautiful than he had ever noticed before.

Hermione opened the parchment and read through carefully.

'1. Would you be prepared for me to continue my career when the child or children reach school age?

I would fully expect you to fulfil your potential. When you say children, I would want no more than two.

2. How important do you view the physical side of the relationship, on a scale of one to ten?

With you? Ten.

3. When we argue, will you be willing to listen to my side of the argument before drawing your wand? (I know you have a temper already, Severus.)

I will do my utmost to ensure we have no reason to argue. If such a thing is likely, I give you permission to hold my wand before we start to shout.

4. Were you attracted to me before The Calling?

I was.

5. Will you want to feed from my blood occasionally?

If you are willing, it could enhance our relationship in certain areas. Refer to question 2. I would very much like to taste you.

6. After we have produced offspring, would you want me to Turn and become Strigoi?

Only if you request it. You need to know that this is a subject I will not bring up. The advantage would be that we both live longer lives together. The disadvantage is that you would no longer be able to bear a child and would need to use blood as a food source. If you do not choose to be Turned, I would live approximately two hundred years longer than you.

7. I understand that Strigoi can fly. Would you be willing not to fly with me, as I am particularly scared of heights?

I do fly on occasion, but I much prefer Apparition. I think that answers your question.

8. Do you think that you will learn to love me?

I already do. Silly witch.'

Hermione's lower lip trembled as she read his last answer, and her eyes found his shyly.

'Really?' she whispered.

Severus took her hand in his and ran his thumb across her knuckles gently. 'Really.'

Hermione beamed a wide smile at him, unable to stop herself. She didn't know if what she felt for Severus was love, not yet anyway, but it felt good, whatever it was.

'Do you want to talk about my answers, Severus?' she said, leaning forward across the table as he lifted her fingers to his lips.

'No need. I already know we are compatible, Hermione. The question is...' He paused in his attentions to her digits. 'Do you?'

He took a finger into his mouth and sucked on it seductively, and Hermione was lost.

'Yes, I do Severus,' she said lightly, fascinated by the sensations he was creating in her crotch.

Her finger let his mouth with a pop. 'So you will marry me, then?' He gazed at her intensely, and Hermione felt that she was turning into a puddle of goo and would slide off the chair any second. She found her tongue suddenly too large for her mouth, so she merely nodded.

'In that case.' Severus stood suddenly and put his robes over his smart attire. 'We are leaving now. There is business to conduct, and I'm not willing to wait for you any longer, Hermione Granger.' He held his hand to her, and she took it without question. If Dumbledore appeared from the next booth and offered to bind them there and then, she would have happily agreed.

Hermione shivered as Severus gallantly lifted her wrap and placed it across her shoulders and then followed it with his arm. His fingers pressed firmly into the top of her shoulder, and he all but marched her out of the restaurant. Pausing at the door, he paid the waitress over the amount for the meal, not bothering to wait for his change, and then Apparated them back to the gates of Hogwarts.

Dumbledore was non-plussed at the urgent and dusty arrival of Severus and Hermione through his Floo. He noted with interest the firm hold that Severus had on Hermione's hand and the flushed, pink tinge to her cheeks.

'Severus, Miss Granger. You are very welcome,' he said. 'Is everything quite alright?'

Hermione looked up at Severus and realised that now they were there, he was too strained to speak and fully in the grip of The Calling. His goal was so close; he could hardly bear it. Ignoring the nervous frisson that ran through her at his deeply penetrating gaze, she turned to the headmaster and regarded him coolly.

'Headmaster, Professor Snape and I would request that you bind us in a civil ceremony, if you would be so kind?' She fought to keep the anger from her voice.

'Oh, that is wonderful news? Do you have a date in mind?' He pulled his diary towards him.

'Now would be good, if you aren't too busy?' Hermione smiled at him, but it didn't reach her eyes. She would have liked to have planned a more romantic, lovely affair and maybe even invite some friends. As it was, she couldn't keep Severus in limbo any longer.

'Now? Are you totally sure, Hermione? It seems so sudden.' Dumbledore frowned and hoped that Severus hadn't slipped her a lust potion.

'If I had known about The Calling sooner, Professor, I would have had more time to prepare. If we don't do this tonight, Severus is at risk of going mad with lust, and right now, only I can fix that. So, if you please?'

Dumbledore winced at the implication of her words, and his face flushed. 'Very well,' he said calmly. 'I shall have to call Minerva as a witness.'

'Hurry up, you old fool,' Severus hissed through gritted teeth.

'Calm down, Severus,' Hermione said firmly. She reached up and cupped his cheek, and his eyes found hers. 'It won't be much longer, I promise.'

Minerva stepped into Dumbledore's office wearing her nightwear, with her long hair in a plait down her back. She looked at Hermione and Severus for a moment, and Hermione wondered if she was about to feel the wrath of her tongue. Instead, the older witch came forward and embraced them both.

'Congratulations,' she said warmly. 'I am so glad for you both. Thank you, Hermione. He really is precious to me,' she said, taking Hermione's hand and squeezing it.

'Sentimental Gryffindor,' Severus muttered, avoiding Minerva's teary gaze. Hermione smirked and resolved to make a point of finding out the true nature of Severus' relationship with Minerva. It obviously ran deeper than outward appearances, but she shouldn't have been surprised.

'Can we do this, please?' Severus said. All semblance of the self-assured man in the restaurant had slipped, leaving behind a seething mass of hormones.

'Join hands, Hermione, Severus,' Dumbledore said clearly. They did so and as his waved his wand in a complicated movement; golden light threaded its way around them and tied itself across their joined hands. Hermione felt a shiver of power pass through her and saw that Severus felt it, too. Through a haze of golden light, he smiled at her.

'It is done,' Dumbledore said. 'Congratulations, Mr and Mrs Snape.'

Hermione beamed at Severus, who looked at her keenly, an unspoken question in his eyes. Hermione nodded and led him to the Floo.

'Thank you, Professors,' she called before stepping through the Floo into her own bedchamber with her new husband.

If Hermione had expected unbridled, unchecked passion, she was pleasantly surprised. Severus undressed her slowly and kissed every area of exposed skin, and when he revealed her firm, young breasts for the first time, he revered them with his mouth and lavished her nipples with his tongue. Hermione felt the power in his arms when he lifted her and placed her onto the bed, and as he stripped naked, the sight of his engorged penis made her ache with want.

He sat on the edge of the bed and trailed his fingers along her bare skin, making her shiver. 'This is your first time, isn't it?'

'Of course it is. If you wanted experience, you should have fallen in love with Lavender Brown.' She laughed lightly.

Severus moved and lay beside her, the heat from his flesh warming her. She turned and pressed her body against his, feeling the tip of his cock as it nudged against her lower lips. 'Gods, Hermione,' he moaned, capturing her lips with his own and sliding his fingers between them. He caressed her clit, gently and then more firmly as she arched against him then shuddered and cried out as she came fiercely against his hand. Relaxed but not yet fully sated, she lay back and let her thighs fall open in invitation, and he laid himself above her with his penis at her entrance, staring down at her nakedness as if he could hardly believe his luck.

'If this should hurt,' he panted. Hermione placed a finger on his lips.

'It might, but not for long. Please, just make me yours,' she whispered. It was obviously the right thing to say, because his eyes flared open and he entered her swiftly, his mouth open in a silent cry of pleasure as he felt her moist, wet heat for the first time. Hermione gasped as he filled her, the sharp pang of pain soon soothed by the feeling of fullness, and by her joy at creating such pleasure for him. She had never seen him so at ease, so open, and all of his emotions showed on his face. Then he began to move, soft, firm strokes at first, and he tipped his pelvis to an angle and thrust again. Hermione cried out with desire. He had found a place deep inside that made her want to stay like this forever, and as she felt another orgasm build, she became uncontrollably vocal in her desire for more.

Before long, she was writhing beneath him, arching her hips to meet his thrusts, until he started to move with erratic urgency and could hold back no longer.

'Fuck, Hermione. Come for me, wife,' he said, his voice trembling with lust.

'Oh, Gods, Severus,' she cried. Her orgasm shuddered through her, and she felt her inner walls tighten around him, and then the flood of his release as he cried out her

name. His orgasm made his legs tremble until he could no longer hold his own weight, and he collapsed gently onto her.

Exhausted, he rolled from her slowly, pulling her close to his chest, his breathing deep and laboured.

'Thank you,' he whispered.

'Any time,' she replied, smiling against his sweat-covered chest.

If I Am Brave And Bare My Soul, Love Me Still

Chapter 12 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Hermione awoke in a state of mild panic. Something heavy was keeping her from moving her legs, and she couldn't remember where her wand was. It was only as she wriggled and a warm, smooth hand came around her waist and upwards to cup her breast, that she remembered Severus was with her.

'I'm Mrs Snape,' she whispered, smiling to herself.

'Mmm,' he murmured, nuzzling her neck. 'Actually, you're Mrs Aspen, but Mrs Snape sounds just as good to me.'

Hermione tried to formulate a question, but his tongue was doing delicious things to her throat, and his fingertips were caressing her nipples and clouding her thought processes with other, more relevant ideas. She turned her head and their lips met, and this time Hermione did get the passion she had expected the night before. Severus plundered her mouth with his tongue and turned her onto her back, his fingers exploring her body like a virtuoso playing a piano. He dropped his head to her throat and began to suck gently, and Hermione moaned and let her hands drift to his buttocks. She had no experience in touching a man's body, but she knew what she wanted to do. Carefully, she caressed his skin and moved her hand to where his hard penis lay against her thigh. Tentatively, she wrapped her hand around his length and started to masturbate him, sighing as he adjusted his position to give her more space. He looked down into her face, his eyes intensely boring into hers as he bent to kiss her tenderly.

'I want to feed from you,' he whispered in her ear. 'It will be pleasurable for us both, I promise,' he murmured, his teeth nipping her lobe as his fingers drifted between her legs.

'I want you to, Severus. I want to know all of you,' she said hoarsely.

There was no preamble this time, just soft groans as he entered her and began to move inside her. They soon found their rhythm, and Hermione knew her orgasm was close.

'I'm coming, oh, God... Severus...' she moaned.

Severus grunted, and his hair fell across her chest as his mouth lingered at her throat. His thrusts became more urgent, pounding her firmly into the mattress, and she felt herself start to unravel beneath him. Her orgasm began, and at the same time she felt a sharp nip from his teeth, followed by the sensation of floating. She was vaguely aware of him drinking her blood and could feel it flowing into his mouth slowly, and she was overwhelmed by the intensity of her orgasm, which seemed to last far longer than before. Her whole body was caught up in the feeling of pleasure and pain melded into one, until she slowly came down from her peak.

Severus moaned deeply and pushed himself up on his arms. Hermione looked into his face dreamily and caught a glimpse of sharp, pointed teeth tipped with her blood. His face was alive, his skin glowing from the inside and his eyes sparkling with ecstasy as he looked down at her. He bent his head and kissed her with his open mouth, and she tasted her own blood on his tongue as he explored her eagerly. He pulled away suddenly, his face twisted in uncontrolled pleasure, and she felt his cock go harder within her.

'Fuck, Hermione!' he shouted, thrusting once more as his orgasm overtook him.

Hermione locked her ankles behind his buttocks and pushed Severus deeper inside her, feeling his cock as it pulsed and his semen as it gushed from him. Severus opened his eyes and gazed at her face, her hair splayed across the pillow, a warm smile on her lips. He caressed her neck, and Hermione felt a gentle healing spell flow from his fingertips.

'That was wonderful,' she whispered.

'My witch,' he murmured, capturing her already swollen lips with his own. He looked down at her, and she watched his emotions play over his face. His eyes became troubled, and Hermione felt him pull away from her as his mood changed.

He rolled away from her and swung his legs to the side of the bed, then hung his head in his hands.

'Severus?' Hermione sat up in concern and scooted over to his side. She caressed his bare shoulders until he stopped her movements with his hand. 'What's wrong? Did I do something I shouldn't have?'

Severus turned to her with a pained look on his face. 'No, not at all. You have been perfect, so much more than I could have imagined,' he said softly. 'I feel I have cheated you, however.'

'What do you mean? Don't tell me you're seeing someone else!' Hermione laughed.

'No. Never.' He kissed her gently and ran his thumb along her lower lip. 'You know so little about me, and yet I know everything about you. I should have taken the time to share more about my life before we took this step, but The Calling clouded my judgement in so many things. You haven't even had a wedding befitting your status as my wife,' he said sadly.

'We can have another wedding if that would make you happy, Severus. And as for knowing everything about you, I know enough. I know what Death Eaters had to do, Severus, and I'm not so stupid that I didn't think about that before I made my offer to Dumbledore.'

'You are so innocent still,' he said. 'Today will change all of that. I must see Albus, but get ready for a journey, Hermione. It's time you knew the truth of me.'

Hermione had no idea what to expect when Severus told her he was taking her to his ancestral home. His Uncle Nikolai had left him everything in his will, including the house. Hermione sensed that this was not necessarily a good thing. They walked down the tree-lined street in silence, with Severus a good few paces in front as she tried to keep up with him.

At the door, Severus paused and turned towards her. 'I hope you are feeling strong, witch. This is likely to be a difficult,' he said coolly.

'I will be fine, Severus. Whatever you need to tell or show me, I am sure to have known much worse,' she said firmly. Her thoughts immediately went back to her torture at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange, and she took a deep breath to steel herself. She had done well to keep the memories at bay, but occasionally they haunted her dreams and reminded her that her life had not always been safe.

Severus nodded once and unlocked the imposing wooden door, pushing it open and allowing Hermione to walk ahead. The hallway was dark, and Hermione jumped as the candle sconces sprang to life. Hermione's eyes grew wide at the opulent splendour that surrounded her. Gilt-framed oil paintings hung on both sides of the wide entrance hall, and the walls were covered in deep red-flocked wallpaper. The dark, wood floor shone, and the intricately woven rugs just added to the sense of stateliness and money.

'You must be quite rich, Severus,' she said in awe.

'Not particularly, although we shall be comfortable if I decide to sell the house. This way,' he said, walking across the hallway and into a room on the right.

Hermione had thought that the entrance was impressive, but the next room totally took her breath away. It was obviously a dining room, dominated by a large mahogany table that would probably seat sixteen, resplendent with a grand candelabrum at its centre. Severus walked along the length of the room and stopped abruptly to face a large portrait on the far wall.

'My father, and the reason we are here,' he said sharply. Hermione realised he wasn't looking at the man in the painting but at her, and she cast a wary glance at him before looking up into the face of the man who had produced her husband.

A thin, angular face stared imperiously from the canvas, and it was immediately obvious that the Snape nose was genetic. Other than this, there was little resemblance, and Hermione noticed with interest that the man's hair was sandy brown. Severus must have inherited his colouring from his mother. She peered closer and read the nameplate, etched deeply in ornate scrolling script.

'Tobias Aspen, Strigoi Lord'.

Frowning, she looked at Severus in confusion. 'Aspen? You said I was Mrs Aspen earlier, too. What does that mean, Severus?'

'The family name is Aspen. Snape is simply an anagram, a useful device should one wish to hide from a pursuer.' Severus's lips tightened, and his eyes became dark.

'An anagram? How clever,' she whispered. The whole thing was very intriguing indeed.

'Come. We should find somewhere more comfortable to continue the tale.' Severus strode ahead of her again, back into the entranceway and across into a smaller and very comfortable sitting room. Severus withdrew his wand and lit the open fire, gesturing to Hermione to sit. Two large, overstuffed sofas sat opposite each other, and she sat on the nearest one and watched as Severus rested his hand on the marble mantelpiece. He looked every inch a noble Lord, and she wondered if he had inherited the title from his father. She was mesmerised by the firelight as it cast him into silhouette, and when he began to speak, she was enraptured.

'I was a babe in arms when I left this house. I returned as a young and impulsive teenager with one wish. It can be a wonderful and terrible thing to fulfil your deepest desires, Hermione,' he sighed. With measured movements, Snape put another log onto the fire and then sat beside Hermione, his face a mask.

'What happened, when you came back here?' she asked quietly.

'I will tell you, but you need to understand the whole story first. I have never told another soul what I am about to tell you. Albus only knew what I chose to tell him. I owe you this, Hermione. I only hope that you don't regret my decision afterwards.' He turned to face her, and Hermione saw that he was unsure about sharing his past with her. Moving closer, she took his hand in hers.

'You need to trust me, Severus. Just start at the beginning,' she said firmly.

'My father and mother had a traditional Strigoi match. Mother was young, only sixteen, when they met, and my father was completely smitten with her. I imagine they were happy in the beginning. His love for her was overwhelming to the point of obsession. I imagine such a thing would be flattering for a young girl newly wed. But when she fell pregnant with me, everything changed.' Severus paused and took a breath. 'His temper was terrifying, as my mother and I discovered to our cost. The Aspen nose was not the only thing I inherited from my father, and I am more like him than I would care to admit. My father became jealous of the child my mother carried. He was unwilling to share her with another.'

Hermione felt a lump in her throat and a real sense of dread. 'What did he do?'

'Initially, he tried to persuade her to abort the child. He told her it would ruin her looks, for she was incredibly beautiful when she married. He threatened to leave her if she became too fat, and instead of making love to her as a husband should, he took what he wanted, when he wanted. He handled her roughly in an attempt to make her lose the child, and the situation would have continued if Nikolai hadn't become aware of it.'

Severus summoned a dusty bottle and a crystal glass from the sideboard and poured himself a measure of whisky. He drank it in one go and then stared at the empty glass in deep thought.

'How did Nikolai find out what was happening?' Hermione said.

'My mother ended up in hospital the night my father threw her down the stairs,' he whispered.

'Oh, no,' she whispered. Tears filled her eyes and she brushed them away with the back of her hand.

'Nikolai moved into the house to keep an eye on my mother until I was born, and my father changed his behaviour to that of attentive husband and excited father-to-be,' he said flatly. 'It was an act, of course.'

'Bastard,' Hermione whispered.

Severus laughed harshly. 'Precisely so.'

'What happened when you were born, Severus? Wasn't he happy?' Hermione felt such empathy for Severus' mother; she was almost too scared to know what happened next.

'You know in the Strigoi culture, Hermione, that a female cannot bear children once they are Turned. Families tend to be small by choice, because it is far easier for a female to be Turned at a young age. My mother wanted another child; my father did not. He only tolerated the one he already had. He insisted that my mother was Turned, but she refused. He beat her for daring to refuse him, but Nikolai arrived just in time. He saved her life again that night.'

'How did Nikolai find out?' she said faintly.

'I told him,' he said, his voice low. 'I was five years old, and I ran to his house two streets from here. It was late at night, and I had to hammer on the door so hard, my knuckles were bleeding by the time I roused the household,' he whispered.

'Oh, Severus,' Hermione choked out. Tears were falling openly down her cheeks. 'What happened then?'

'Nikolai knocked my father unconscious, and while he was out cold, he helped me gather enough belongings for myself and my mother, and we left the house that night. Nikolai hid us in his own home for a while, but my father visited so often in his search for my mother that it became unsafe. Nikolai created new identities for us, and a friend found us a new home in England.'

'That must have been very frightening for you,' Hermione said, her voice full of emotion.

'You would have thought so, but it was actually the happiest time of my childhood. Mother and I had our own house, and it was safe. She would sing every day while baking bread in the kitchen, and at night, we would sit and read together. It was a simple life to many, but for us, it was wonderful,' he said softly. A small smile played on his lips at the memory.

'What happened to your father, Severus?' Hermione asked tentatively.

'When I turned fifteen, my mother died from a brain haemorrhage. It was quick, but nevertheless a great shock,' he whispered. 'I was at Hogwarts, of course, and Albus took me out of Arithmancy class to tell me. I fainted with shock, and when I woke, Nikolai was there. I hadn't seen him since the time we left Bucharest, but he came to me when I needed him the most.'

'He sounds like he was a lovely man,' Hermione said with feeling.

'He helped me to sort everything out after Mother died, and during the holidays, I would visit him in Bucharest. My father went travelling for years after we left. I sometimes wonder if he was still searching for us after all that time,' he said quietly. 'Then, when I was just seventeen, I came to visit Nikolai. He had sold his house and moved back into this one. This has always been the family seat, but with my father away, someone needed to look after it. I had been here but a few days when my father returned.'

Hermione ran her thumb across Severus' knuckles and smiled at him to continue.

'I had gone to my room to get a book we had been discussing and then went to join Nikolai in his study. I heard raised voices, and as I pushed the door open, my father lunged at me. I was more powerful than him, however. He was no wizard, only Strigoi. I hexed him so hard he flew across the room and hit his head against the fireplace.'

'Was he dead?' Hermione whispered.

'As good as. The idea that Strigoi live forever is a myth, as you know. However, we do have a marvellous capacity for recovery from injuries that would kill a mortal. My own situation proves that, I think.' He gestured towards the snakebite scar on his neck, and Hermione nodded in understanding. 'Nikolai gave me the option. To allow my father to survive, or to truly end his life.'

'Oh, my God...!' Hermione felt her mouth go dry.

'As I looked at him, all I could think of was the way he had treated my mother, and I hated him. Hate is a powerful emotion, particularly for an angry seventeen-year-old. I made the ultimate choice. Late that night, we took my father to a crossroads deep in the country, and I stabbed him through the heart with his own silver dagger.' Severus turned his face to Hermione, and the firelight danced deep in the depths of his hard glare. 'I have never regretted it. That night, Nikolai Turned me, and my place within the family line was established.'

He turned to her, his face ashen, and took her other hand in his. 'You see why I had to tell you, Hermione. I murdered my father.'

Tender Looks Become A Habit

Chapter 13 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

Severus looked down at Hermione's sleeping form and gently brushed a stray curl from her face. She had said nothing after his confession, but had simply wrapped her arms around him, pulling him to her in a tight hug. She had sobbed against his chest, and for the first time in many years, Severus wept for the loss of his mother and for the agony of not being able to share his current happiness with her. He thought his mother would have approved of Hermione. They held each other for a long time, until Hermione had fallen asleep.

'Hermione,' he said gently, stroking her arm to wake her.

She opened her eyes slowly, then sat up suddenly when she realised she had fallen asleep on the sofa. 'I'm sorry, Severus. I always seem to fall asleep at the wrong time,' she muttered.

'You are beautiful when you're sleeping, so I think I can forgive you. I only hope you can forgive me.' He sounded unsure.

'There is nothing to forgive, Severus. He shouldn't have been allowed to get away with what he did.' Hermione's eyes flashed in anger, and Severus couldn't resist a smirk. 'I do have a question though,' she said. 'You said you had new identities, and I know Snape is really Aspen. But what is your real name if it isn't Severus?'

Severus laughed. 'If we ever have a boy, I shall tell you. I would very much like a son named after me,' he said.

'I really want to have your child, Severus,' she said seriously.

Severus pulled her back into his lap and kissed her soundly. 'You amaze me every day,' he said, unable to hide the passion in his voice. Hermione smiled and caressed his face.

'Do I? Well, you won't be amazed to know that I have no intention of shagging you in this house, Severus Snape, so we'd better get back to Hogwarts if you want to get rid of this,' she smirked, cupping his growing erection playfully.

'I do believe I am henpecked already, and we've only been married one day,' he groaned.

Hermione laughed and kissed him tenderly. 'I do love you, Severus,' she said, her manner turning more solemn.

Severus looked at her with wide eyes. 'You love me, even after all that I have told you?'

'Perhaps I love you because you told me everything. Or perhaps it's because you really are very good in bed. It doesn't matter why. I just know that I do,' she said, suddenly finding the buttons on his jacket incredibly interesting.

'Fortunate for me, then,' he said softly. Hermione looked up at him, and the passion in his eyes made her heart lurch.

'Take me home, Severus,' she whispered.

Hermione scowled at the book before her. The Restricted Section of Hogwarts library was all well and good, but there were some subjects that it just didn't cover. She understood the reasons, of course. Why would a Hogwarts student need a fertility potion, after all?

Hermione cast a Tempus spell and realised it was after midnight. She put the book back on the shelf, cursing under her breath at how inadequate the contents had been, and made her way back to the dungeon. After three months of marriage, she still wasn't pregnant, and she was starting to panic. By her calculations, Severus had just over seven months to live. He hadn't mentioned his anxiety to her, but the lack of conception hung between them like a spectre. It wasn't through lack of trying, either. Hermione thought sadly that it would be wonderful to make love without the nagging hope that this would be the time that worked.

Hermione pushed open the dungeon door quietly and slipped into the bedchamber on tiptoe so as not to disturb his sleep. She had noticed that he was becoming more tired than usual and had started to show dark circles under his eyes. Undressing quietly, she slipped under the covers and snuggled up to him, inhaling the familiar scents of herbs and other potion ingredients.

'Where were you?' he mumbled.

'In the library. I was doing some research,' she said quietly.

'We should make love,' he said wearily.

'You're too tired, Severus,' she replied. 'Wait until morning.'

'No.' He was insistent, and Hermione felt her stomach clench at the desperation in his voice.

'As long as you let me do the work,' she relented. Hermione shifted in the bed and pulled Severus onto his back. Letting her hands caress his chest, she kissed him softly until he was fully awake and then deepened the kiss with her tongue. They were so practised that their bodies responded to each other's touch immediately, and as she slid herself onto him, they sighed in unison.

'Faster,' he hissed, his hands on her thighs guiding her movements. Hermione tipped her pelvis back and moaned as Severus moved his thumb to her clitoris. With urgent thrusts, Severus met Hermione's rocking rhythm, and she cried out.

'Oh, yes.' Hermione came hard, her orgasm quickly followed by Severus' release. He flipped her over quickly and stayed inside her throbbing warmth for a long time, kissing her tenderly.

'Thank you,' his whispered.

The following day, Hermione did the one thing she had put off doing and visited Dumbledore. Severus had insisted that they kept the situation to themselves for now, but Hermione knew he was growing weaker by the day, and they needed help. She didn't intend to tell the old coot anything specific, but she was confident that she had learned enough Slytherin to cajole a favour from him.

'Aniseed Balls,' she said firmly to the gargoyle at the bottom of the staircase. If she wasn't so focussed on her task, she might have laughed, but as it was, she just wanted to get in and get out with her prize. She pushed open the door of the office, and Dumbledore stood to greet her.

'Mrs Snape,' he said warmly.

Hermione wanted to scowl, but forced herself to smile. 'Hello, Professor.'

'What can I do for you? Or have you come to give me some special news?' He looked at her as he sat back in his chair.

'No news yet, but I'm hopeful there will be soon,' she responded. 'I actually came to ask you a favour, sir.'

'Ask away,' he said, helping himself to a bright orange boiled sweet from the bowl in front of him.

'I need a pass to the Ministry library. I know I could ask Severus, but he's been so busy, and you know that he is becoming more exhausted each day. I'm researching my apprenticeship project, and I really don't want to worry him with it.' She bit her lip anxiously. She hoped she was pulling off the contrite student act, but the anxiety was real.

'Is he becoming worse, do you think?' Dumbledore frowned.

'I think he may be, yes. Not that he'd admit to it,' she said honestly.

'If I can ease the burden, then so be it.' Dumbledore waved his wand briefly, and a pass to the Ministry library flew towards Hermione, her name scribed onto it in neat script. She took it gratefully and gave Dumbledore a genuine smile.

'Thank you. You don't know how grateful I am,' she said softly.

Two hours later, Hermione walked out of the Ministry library with a large book under her arm and a determined look on her face. She was well aware the book contained mostly Dark Arts potions and that the brew she intended to make was used in rituals that she would prefer not to know about, but she didn't care. What she cared about was saving Severus.

Back in the lab, Hermione used a charm to display the ingredients on a kind of floating blackboard that followed her along the shelves of the store room as she gathered everything she would need. She checked the list twice and realised there were some ingredients not on the shelf.

'Shit,' she said softly. She had hoped to finish the potion before Severus returned from his classes. Now she would have to send Dante out to Slug and Jiggers for the missing items, and it would be too late to start then. She would just have to wait for Severus to fall asleep and then slip into the lab. It wouldn't be the first time she had

brewed all night.

Severus walked into the dungeon feeling totally exhausted. His classes had been trying, and it had taken all of his energy not to lose his patience with the Ravenclaw first-years. With a deep sigh, he headed for his leather chair and slumped into it. He felt like an old man. He closed his eyes momentarily but was roused when he heard Hermione calling him. He opened one eye at her.

'I'm here,' he said.

'I've run you a bath, Severus,' she said, walking towards him with concern on her face. 'Come on. You look done in, and an early night would do us both good.'

Severus smiled wanly and took her hand with gratitude. There was definitely something to be said about being a married man.

He soaked in the bath, inhaling the delicious aromas of the lavender and rose oils that Hermione had added to the water. After some time, Hermione returned with a large fluffy towel, complete with warming charm, and he allowed her to assist him from the bath and wrap his nakedness in its soft comfort. She turned to leave the room, and he caught her hand in his and pulled her to him. She looked tired herself, and yet here she was, putting his needs first as usual.

'You're doing too much, Hermione. Perhaps you should take a break tomorrow?' He brushed her curls from her face and kissed her creased brow tenderly. He didn't miss the sad glint in her eye, even though she tried to hide it with a smile.

'Perhaps I will,' she agreed in a non-committal tone. 'I have soup from the kitchens and your vial from the store. Let's eat.'

Severus felt a pang of anxiety. Hermione was not her usual self, and he knew that she was worrying about their ongoing predicament. God knows, he was worried too. How many times should a man make love to his wife before impregnating her, for goodness sake? They knew there was nothing wrong with either of them in that area. St. Mungo's had confirmed they were both perfectly healthy and that it was merely a matter of time. But time was the one thing they didn't have.

The soup was delicious as usual, and when Hermione coaxed him to the bedroom, he went without argument despite the early hour. He was pleasantly surprised when she stripped naked alongside him, and they made love slowly beneath sheets. Hermione was warm and encouraging, and she always came with such passion. It was beautiful, watching her unravel with his eager touch and demanding thrusts.

Afterwards, they curled together like spoons, and Severus felt more relaxed and content than he had in a long time. He felt Hermione kiss him between his shoulder blades and murmur 'I love you,' against his flesh, and he smiled to himself. He really was one lucky wizard.

Severus opened his eyes with a start, alert and wide-awake, but with a sense of unease. He turned in the bed and immediately realised that Hermione had gone, and that the sheet where she had lain was freezing to his touch. He climbed from the bed and went to the bathroom, listening for sounds of movement inside. There was nothing. Grabbing his bathrobe and his wand, he walked into the sitting room and still saw no sign of her.

'Hermione,' he called out. 'Hermione!'

He put the robe on in haste and went through to the lab. He knew instantly that there was trouble. A pall of dark blue smoke hung around the ceiling and spurted in great clouds from the cauldron below. He couldn't see Hermione, and he covered his mouth with his sleeve as he approached the gurgling liquid. As he neared the bench, he saw Hermione, collapsed on the floor.

'Oh, fuck,' he gasped. Waving his wand, he placed a stasis charm over whatever it was she was making and ran to her, lifted her effortlessly and ran to the Floo.

'Poppy,' he shouted. 'Poppy! Help me!' His anguished shout got a quick response, and within moments, Hermione was in the hospital wing.

Poppy Pomfrey examined Hermione quickly, twisting her wand above her lifeless body in intricate patterns.

'What is it, for God's sake,' Severus hissed, pacing up and down behind the mediwitch.

'She's inhaled the fumes of whatever she was making. I think she will be fine,' she said lightly, ignoring Severus' tone coolly.

'You think she will be fine?' He glared at her.

Poppy ignored him while she cast another complex spell and then turned to him with a soft smile.

'You'd better sit down, Severus,' she said seriously.

Every Tomorrow A Vision Of Hope

Chapter 14 of 14

Written for the SSHG_Exchange. Marriage Law with a twist.

A/N: Many thanks to astopperindeath for the beta and being so patient, and pointing out the cheese when it was needed! Thanks also to everyone who has read the story and left a review.

Hermione couldn't understand how she had got back into bed, but she turned over slowly and wrapped the covers around her more tightly before reaching her hand out to Severus. She didn't encounter his sleeping form, however, merely fresh, cold air, and she opened her eyes slowly. She knew immediately where she was and gasped. Something must have happened when she was brewing the potion. It would be ruined! She felt the tears welling inside her and snuggled her head below the blankets to hide her weeping face. This was probably the last chance they would have had. Severus was growing weaker by the day, and her period would be due in the next few days. If she didn't take the potion now, she would have to wait another month, and who knew how sick Severus would be by then?

Hermione snuffled sadly and didn't here the firm sound of dragon hide boots as they approached her bed.

'Hermione.' Severus' voice permeated the layers she was hiding under, and it didn't take a genius to work out that he was furious. She pulled the covers from her face slowly and looked up at him.

His face was stern, and he looked down at her dispassionately. 'How are you feeling?'

'Okay I think,' she said quietly. 'What happened exactly?'

'Good question. I definitely do not remember setting you that potion as research material.' He crossed his arms over his chest, and Hermione groaned inwardly. He was in one of those moods. She pushed herself up, plumping the pillow behind her so that she could sit and look at him properly. She was his wife, not just some student he could intimidate.

'Won't you sit down?' she smiled sadly. 'I know I did something very stupid, Severus, and I'm sorry,' she said sincerely.

She thought at first he would continue to stand, but he apparently thought better of it and sat on the chair beside her. It was an improvement, but he sat stiffly and glared at her until she spoke again.

'Does Madam Pomfrey think I will be ok?' she asked him.

'The instructions clearly state that a ventilation charm is necessary for brewing in enclosed spaces. Obviously you chose to ignore that part and inhaled the fumes. Poppy thinks I found you almost as soon as you collapsed. There will be no lasting effect.'

'You're very angry with me,' she stated.

'You nearly lost your life, Hermione. You think I should be grateful?' His eyes turned desperate.

'I'm so sorry,' she sobbed suddenly. Tears ran down her cheeks, and she rubbed them away with the edge of the blanket. 'I just didn't want to lose you, Severus. We've tried so hard to have our baby, and the longer it goes on, the weaker you become. I thought a fertility potion would be a good option, but I've just made things worse, haven't I?'

Hermione covered her face with her hands and cried even harder. She felt the bed dip, and then Severus wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, stroking her hair gently. He kissed the top of her head, and she raised her wet eyes to his.

'I am sorry, Severus,' she said shakily.

'Silly witch,' he murmured, kissing her lightly.

'I suppose my potion is ruined,' she said sadly.

'No, actually. I put it in stasis while Poppy tended to you, and once you were asleep, I returned and finished it for you. It was almost complete.'

'You finished it?' She smiled widely. 'Oh Severus! Then it's not too late?'

Severus moved her away calmly. 'It is too late, Hermione,' he said softly, staring into her eyes.

'What? Why? Oh, gods... I can't have children now, can I? The fumes have made me infertile!' She started to weep again.

'For goodness sake, stop crying,' Severus snapped softly, passing her a handkerchief.

'How can you be so calm?' she moaned. 'I've ruined everything. Gods, Severus, I don't want to lose you!'

'Hermione!' Severus raised his voice, and she stared at him in shock. 'You are babbling, woman!'

'I am. You're right.' Hermione wiped away the remaining tears and shook herself. They would just have to reverse it; that was all. She still had her library pass. There were bound to be other spells.

'Hermione, it's too late because you are already with child,' he said quietly, taking her hand in his.

'I'm what?' She looked at him with wide eyes, and he smiled at her.

'You are pregnant,' he whispered.

'I am? How? I mean, I know how, obviously, but... I mean, when? I don't understand...'

Severus chuckled and pulled her in for a hug. 'As for how, I think that I was on top. As for when, I believe after my bath last night.'

'Oh, my...' Hermione started to laugh. 'Oh, thank gods, Severus!' She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him firmly on his lips. 'What about you? Are you well? Do you feel any different?'

Severus smirked. 'I feel completely normal, and once I get you back to the dungeons and you've rested for a few days, I'll show exactly what normal means,' he said meaningfully. Hermione felt her stomach flip at his words and immediately felt her desire for him as he looked at her meaningfully.

'Oh...' she whispered, as he bent his head to kiss her. He wrapped her slim frame in his arms and held her to him, and she sagged against him as he did wonderful things to her with his tongue. Moaning softly, she gripped the back of his robes with her hands and tried to pull him onto the bed, but he resisted, smiling against her mouth.

'Patience, Hermione,' he said deeply. 'We have all the time in the world.'

There was a large gathering in the Great Hall, and the enchanted ceiling reflected the joy in the room. Hermione wore an off-white, floor length gown, and Ginny had artfully curled her hair into sleek spirals and interwoven them with flowers. Severus wore the same smart jacket and robes he had worn on the night of their marriage, the only addition being a pale yellow iris in his buttonhole.

Albus held his wand aloft to signal the start of the ceremony, and Hermione turned and placed her baby boy into the arms of Ginny Weasley. Severus watched her and smiled as she reached to him and lifted her baby girl, handing her to Molly, who clucked over her like a mother hen and didn't see the smirk on Severus' face. He was only glad that there would be no shortage of babysitters.

'Friends,' Albus voice echoed around the room. 'We are here to bless the marriage of our own Hermione and Severus Snape, in the wish that the happiness they share today is the everlasting kind.'

There was a cheer and a round of applause as Severus took Hermione's hand and kissed it.

'Now to the most important part of the ceremony. We welcome two delightful babies to our world.' Dumbledore beamed and wiped his eyes with the corner of his robe as

Severus and Hermione retrieved their children and turned to face Albus.

'Severus, what name do you give to your daughter?' Albus smiled warmly as Severus took a breath.

'Her name will be Evelyn Hermione Aspen Snape, to be known as Evie,' he said, his confident voice echoing around the hall.

'Hermione, what names will you bestow on your son?'

Hermione smiled and stroked the baby's cheek with a finger gently. 'His name is Samuel Nickolai Aspen Snape,' she said happily, turning to Severus and grinning. Only they knew the origin of Samuel's name, and it would remain a special secret between themselves.

Severus closed the door of the nursery with a smile and listened carefully at the door to make sure that his children really were asleep. Satisfied, he walked back to where he wife was waiting for him in their bedroom.

Moving to Hogsmeade had been Albus' idea, and Severus had to admit it had been a very good one. There was plenty of space, with room for an adequate lab and for all of their books.

'Are they sleeping?' she asked hopefully, reclining on the bed in a pale blue silk nightdress with a rather beguiling slit along the side.

'They are,' he said smoothly. 'You, however, will not be sleeping.'

'Good. Now come here,' she said softly.

Severus dropped his clothes as he walked slowly to the bed, and Hermione's tongue ran teasingly over her lips in anticipation. Lying beside her, he traced his fingers along her body and smirked as she shuddered at his touch, her nipples pert and eager.

'Severus,' she murmured, looking up at him.

'Mmm?' He was distracted by the intriguing way the fabric of her nightdress was folded between her legs, and his fingers started to explore.

'I've been thinking,' she said, letting her hands explore his chest and follow his happy trail downwards absently.

'There's a surprise,' he chuckled. 'About what?'

'About us. Well, about you, really. I've decided, anyway,' she said seriously.

'What have you decided, witch?' Severus lifted the edge of her nightdress and caressed her bum, slipping his fingers between her cheeks.

'I want to be Turned,' she said.

There was silence, and Severus stilled his movements as he stared at Hermione in disbelief.

'Why?' he said finally.

'Because I couldn't bear the thought of living on without you for another two hundred years, and I was rather hoping you felt the same about me,' she said softly, her eyes wide.

'I do. I have been thinking that very thing. I never for a moment thought you would choose this,' he said.

'Well, I have,' she smiled. 'So you had better get used to having me around, Severus Snape.'

Severus smirked at Hermione, who gasped as her nightdress vanished and he covered her body with his.

'There is plenty to get used to,' he joked, palming her full breasts and licking her nipples lightly.

'That's not fair! They'll go back to normal when I've finished breastfeeding!'

'I sincerely hope not,' he said with mock shock.

'Oh, shut up, Severus, and make love to me,' she said with exasperation.

'Bossy witch,' he murmured as he entered her.

The End.

Original Prompts

1. Marriage law twist. Snape is the one who has to get married (make up a reason why) and decides he absolutely must have Hermione. She is not entirely willing. Can be canon-compliant or AU from any point.

3. Twilight-similar scenario: Snape is a vampire, but is hiding it so that he can stay and teach at Hogwarts. When Hermione reaches the age of maturity, her scent becomes irresistible to him. How will he react?

I just want to add a final thank you to SwissMiss for the brilliantly inspiring prompts. I had a great time writing this :)