

How I Met Your Mother

by linlawless

A seemingly simple question from Severus and Hermione's young daughter on their anniversary sends Severus meandering down memory lane.

Why did you get married?

Chapter 1 of 6

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A/N: This was written for the 10th Anniversary of sshg fanfiction celebration at the celebrate_sshg livejournal. I used two prompts, though I didn't stay faithful to either: (1) Hermione and Snape have a 10th year anniversary. But it does not mark a happy day. It is a day both (or one) of them want to forget. Their story of coming together is not the kind one would tell one's children when they ask Mum and Dad how they fell in love. (2) Okay, I know it's cliché but I love a good MLC fic. So how about something along the lines of MLC but with some kind of different twist.(whatever that is is up to you) I would prefer Hermione to be at least a little bit older, not school girly.

American readers will immediately realize that I shamelessly stole my title (but not much else) from a television show. Some of the plot details herein were also vaguely influenced by fics I've read that involved the Yenta Livery Challenge, though I haven't read any of those in quite a while, so if anything in here is very like someone else's plot, it was unintentionally done and I apologize. In keeping with the anniversary party theme of the celebrate_sshg livejournal community, this is rather fluffy.

Also, I realize that the way I've set up the timing in this fic, "present day" should really be in 2013; however, that made the flashback timing significantly more complicated to express without really adding anything to the story (in fact, I found it distracting when I tried to write it that way). I could have made things happen sooner after the war, but I didn't think that suited the storyline as well. I hope you'll suspend disbelief and pretend you're reading this in 2013 ;).

Obviously, these characters belong to JKR, except Serena, who can't exist in JKR's world and is therefore mine. Also, although I make no money from it, anything original in this fic is mine; please do not copy, re-post, or redistribute it without my express permission. Thanks.

I. Why did you get married?

Present Day

"Daddy, Mummy says it's your tenth an'vers'ry. What's a an'vers'ry?"

Severus's answer was so patient that few of his acquaintances would have ever believed that this was their grumpy former professor or colleague. "It means that on this date, ten years ago, Mummy and Daddy got married."

"Oh." A short pause. "Why did you and Mummy get married?"

Severus thought for a moment before choosing his words carefully. "Because neither one of us could resist."

"Oh." Another pause. "Tell me about when you and Mummy got married, Daddy. Please?"

"All right," Severus negotiated, "if you'll promise to be good for Uncle Draco tonight, I'll tell you the whole story while we wait for Mummy to finish getting ready to go out." He might adore his angelic daughter, but he certainly wasn't blind to her faults one of which was that she tended to run roughshod over any adult in her sphere, other than her parents, and get into all sorts of mischief. It had gotten to the point where a little blackmail was often required to get one of their friends to agree to watch her so that he and Hermione could have some time alone now and again. Fortunately, Draco was planning a surprise birthday party for his wife, so all it had taken this time was a few pointed remarks about what a shame it would be if Ginny got wind of it beforehand.

"I promise, Daddy," the girl said solemnly, her dark eyes serious.

"All right," he said, patting his lap. "Hop up here, and I'll tell you."

As she complied, he quickly sifted through his memories of the events, deciding where to start...

Ten years and three days earlier

Severus ate dinner silently, making it appear as though he was ignoring the conversations of his colleagues. He had nothing in particular to say, and no one he especially wanted to say it to, so he effortlessly maintained his anti-social persona even now, five years after the end of the war. Still, the habits of nearly a lifetime die hard, so he almost automatically found himself registering snippets of dialogue, just in case there was some information that might be useful or important that no one would otherwise bother to tell him.

Thus it was that, in addition to the usual gossip about alumni ("Did you hear Ginny Weasley finally gave up on Harry Potter and accepted a date with Draco Malfoy, of all people?") and students ("The current pair of Weasleys give every sign of being even more creative pranksters than their uncles ever were"), Severus heard something that would have made him jolt up in his chair, had he not already been sitting as straight as was humanly possible. And, of course, had he not been so practiced at keeping his reactions to himself.

"Rumor is that they're awfully concerned that the postwar baby boom was more of a whimper," Hermione Granger was saying to Neville Longbottom. The two had been on faculty for nearly three years now Longbottom having replaced Pomona in the Herbology post when she had decided to travel the world in her golden years, and Granger having taken over Charms when Flitwick had retired and they were thick as thieves. Severus generally ignored both of them as much as possible, but for once, their conversation was interesting. "Harry says he's pretty sure the law is going to pass. He says he's tried arguing against it pointed out that it smacks of the sort of intrusive paternalism that one might expect from another Dark Lord but they're not hearing him. They're just too worried that the wizarding population will shrink away into nothingness."

Longbottom shuddered. His tone bordered on whinging when he responded. "I don't want to get married yet, Hermione. I haven't met the right woman."

"Well," Granger said briskly, "from what Harry says, they're at least as concerned with compatibility as with the fact of the marriage the aim, after all, is children, so they don't want people marrying in name only. Apparently, the law is going to include a requirement that couples take a compatibility test that supposedly predicts Arithmatically the degree of compatibility between a potential couple."

"So if people aren't compatible, they won't be allowed to marry?" Longbottom sounded even more horrified than he already had. "Are they also going to force strangers who come out as compatible into marriages? And what if it's an acquaintance that you don't particularly like? Who's inventing this compatibility test, anyway?"

"That's the thing, Neville," Granger replied, her voice dropping so that Severus had to strain to hear it. He allowed his gaze to roam over the hall, so as not to give away that he was listening. If Granger realized, she'd probably cast a Silencing Charm out of spite. "No one seems to know. Harry said the Ministry is keeping it under wraps, but when he tried to find out, he got the sense he was being stonewalled." Severus kept his gaze moving, and realized that a few other people were listening as well. Vector was frowning, so he supposed that meant she hadn't been consulted about the Arithmantic algorithms the Ministry had commissioned. *Odd, that*, Severus thought Vector was well-known to be the most accomplished Arithmancer in Britain.

When he caught sight of Trelawney, who was watching Granger and looking downright smug, Severus suddenly knew that he wanted no part of whatever compatibility test this law might mandate.

Trelawney had been trying to convince him for years that they were destined for one another. The very thought made him ill. Whatever it took, therefore, Severus would avoid being subjected to this latest bit of Ministry idiocy.

Present day

Recalling himself and, more importantly, to whom he was speaking, Severus looked at his daughter and said simply, "Well, the start of it all was a dunderheaded law the Ministry decided to enact, requiring people to get married. The Ministry was going to tell people who they were and were not allowed to marry. So Mummy and I decided not to allow them to make such a personal decision for us."

Ten years earlier

It had been a bit more complicated than that, of course. Severus had spent the next three days using every contact he had or (more accurately) every contact Lucius Malfoy had to find out everything he could about this law. Lucius had had the good sense to switch sides as end of the war was drawing near and therefore had managed to retain his fortune and his influence. All it had taken to ensure he used both was casual mention that Draco might find himself wedded to someone unacceptable in short order. A few discreet questions and (Severus presumed) the exchange of several hundred Galleons later, and Lucius informed Severus of all the details of the proposed law. They were largely as Granger had heard, and unfortunately, they affected every witch and wizard of childbearing age which, sadly, included Severus.

Severus and Lucius spent an entire Saturday afternoon in the drawing room at Malfoy Manor discussing what might best be done. Lucius had already tried, with surprisingly little success, to influence the Ministry to abort this ridiculous plan. Then he had tried to convince them that restrictions should be placed on intermarrying between purebloods and Muggle-borns only to find that the Ministry now planned to prohibit even the most compatible couples from marrying if both were purebloods. Their reasoning was that intermarriage would probably reduce the Squib birthrate, and anyway, in the post-Voldemort era, it was better to create family relationships that would reduce prejudice.

Lucius said, "You should thank me, Severus. I very selflessly, I might add tried to assist *you*, at least."

"How so?" Severus asked. "And what was in it for you?" he added suspiciously.

"You wound me, Severus," Lucius replied virtuously. "I attempted to persuade the Ministry to at least restrict the acceptability of half-blood marriages to purebloods. Trelawney is pureblood, isn't she? And I know you don't want that delusional stick in your bed."

"No, but I repeat, what's in it for you?"

Lucius sighed. "Well, I must admit, the thought of making polite conversation with that woman over dinner puts my appetite right off. *Anyone* would be better than being stuck with *her*," he told Severus. "Even Granger would be better than Trelawney. At least she's not so bad to look at and can hold a normal conversation."

Severus snorted. "Last I heard, Granger still has no use for you, due to certain unfortunate events that occurred right here in this very room, as I understand it during the war," he pointed out.

Lucius smiled and gave an elegantly dismissive wave of his hand. "I'm quite confident that I could charm her into tolerating me if it became necessary. She might even grow

to like me."

Severus wasn't so sure Granger was notoriously stubborn but he didn't bother to say so. "I'm assuming your attempt to save us both from Trelawney didn't work?"

"Unfortunately, my contact pointed out that the stated reasons for limiting pureblood marriages don't apply to half-bloods. He refused to even suggest it to the Minister."

A short while later, Severus took his leave. When he arrived back at Hogwarts, he closeted himself in his private quarters with a bottle of Firewhisky, forgoing dinner as he considered what to do to extricate himself from the reach of the Ministry.

The only solution, short of leaving the country or snapping his wand, was to get married before the law took effect. Since neither leaving Britain nor living as a Muggle appealed, Severus supposed he'd better find a way to get married immediately.

Lucius's words about Granger kept ringing in his head. *She's not so bad to look at and can hold a normal conversation...* Of course, she would never agree to marry him, would she?

Unless...

Two hours later, Granger looked shocked. "You want me to do *what?*!"

"Marry me."

"Marry you?" Granger repeated dumbly.

"Is that so difficult a concept?" Severus sneered. "One would think that the brightest witch of her age would understand the phrase."

"But why would you want to marry me? Have you been drinking?" she asked, sounding suspicious now.

"Yes, but I also took some Sober-Up, so I'm perfectly lucid. I am well aware that I have just suggested we get married."

"You didn't suggest it," Granger pointed out. "You told me you were invoking my life debt to you. What life debt? I don't owe you a life debt."

"I believe, if you search your memory carefully, you'll realize you do."

"For *what?*" Granger sounded frustrated.

"If you'll recall, for just a moment, the events of your third year, I'm certain you'll recall the correct moment." Severus waited for the Knut to drop. She was still a clever woman, so he didn't have to wait long.

"You can't mean... but..."

The expression on her face was rather amusing, Severus thought idly. He said, "Exactly. I protected you from your dear Defence professor in his less-than-human form, did I not?"

"Well... yes, I suppose." Granger sounded skeptical, but they both knew he was right. She *did* owe him a life debt, dating back a decade.

And, as an avowed heterosexual, he could hardly marry one of her friends, who *also* owed him a life debt. He restated the obvious. "As I said, you owe me a life debt, which I am calling in at this time."

"But *why?*" She sounded rather upset.

Severus inwardly cursed her need to question everything. He had the right to invoke the life debt in any way he chose, and she knew it, so nothing more should need to be said. "I have my reasons. *You* do not need to know what they are."

"But... you don't even like me."

Severus didn't see how that was relevant. "I don't like anyone. If I have to marry, it may as well be you."

"If you have to... Wait, you know about the stupid law the Ministry is planning?" Her eyes narrowed, and he almost rolled his eyes at the way she seemed to analyze that bit of information.

"Naturally. Not much escapes my notice." Severus didn't bother to mention that it was her own indiscreet discussion with Longbottom that had put him onto the information. Who knew when he might want to eavesdrop again?

"So why not wait until they match you with someone compatible?" She was clutching at straws, Severus was certain. She was far too clever to think he would want anyone the Ministry might choose for him, wasn't she?

"What makes you so certain that the Ministry will match me with someone compatible?"

"Well, they're using an Arithmantic algorithm..." Granger appeared to be trying to convince herself as much as Severus.

"Developed by whom? And if it's so wonderful, why won't they allow anyone to evaluate it? If not by the general public, then by an expert, like Septima?"

"I did wonder about that..." Granger's voice trailed off. "But are you certain you want to do this? Marry *me*, of all people? You dislike me and you hate my friends. None of that is likely to change."

"I don't hate your friends. I simply dislike them, as I do everyone," Severus replied. He was getting impatient. He had a strong feeling that this must be done now, tonight, or it would be thwarted and he would find himself tied to Trelawney. "Look, it can be a marriage in name only. We can continue to live separate lives, we'll both be protected from this latest bit of Ministry idiocy, and your life debt will be cleared. I don't see what the problem is."

"The *problem* is you don't even like me," Granger said, for the third time.

"So what? You don't like me, either. Liking is not a prerequisite for a marriage of convenience." He paused. "Come, now, Granger, you know you have no choice. I've invoked your life debt. So gather what you need and let's go."

"Let's go?" Granger sounded incredulous now. "You can't mean... You want to do this *now*? As in, *tonight*?"

"No time like the present," Severus pointed out blandly. "Besides, my sources tell me the passage of the law is imminent. I don't want to miss my chance to avoid its reach by waiting."

"All right, fine," Granger grumbled. "I suppose I have no choice. But I warn you, I don't appreciate being forced by *you* any more than I wanted to be forced by the Ministry. I'm probably going to make your life miserable."

"My life is already miserable," Severus replied. "I doubt anything you can do will make it worse."

As much a war as a marriage...

Chapter 2 of 6

A seemingly simple question from Severus and Hermione's young daughter on their anniversary sends Severus meandering down memory lane.

II. As Much a War as a Marriage

Present day

"So, Daddy, you and Mummy ran away and got married that very night?" Serena asked.

"Yes, we did. It was just the two of us, along with a Muggle innkeeper and his wife. They married us over the anvil that very night, ten years ago today." He paused, glancing at the clock. If his wife didn't hurry, they would be late for the theater. He was taking her to a revival of "The Taming of the Shrew." It was a running joke between them now, but for those first months of their marriage...

Serena interrupted his musings, "And you lived happily ever after, right, Daddy?"

He chuckled. He still found it difficult to believe that this delightful, inquisitive sprite had come out of what had been, initially, as much a war as a marriage.

Nine years and nine months earlier

Severus opened the door to his quarters cautiously, hoping to sneak past his erstwhile wife if she happened to be present. How naïve he had been when he had told her he doubted she could make his life worse! She seemed to have taken his words as a personal challenge.

She had made it *her* life's mission to make *his* life hell since the day three months ago when they had married. Her opening salvo had been to announce that she was not going to have people thinking she had married to evade the effects of the Marriage Law, which had been passed a mere three days after their hasty wedding. In retrospect, Hermione's determination to keep their mutual disregard to themselves had turned out to be fortunate, because when the "Law to Prevent Decline in the Population of Wizarding Britain" (informally referred to by all and sundry as the "Marriage Law") had passed, a close reading made clear that marriages that could be proven to have been entered into for the purpose of avoiding the terms of said law could be voided by the Ministry at its discretion.

So instead of a marriage on paper only, in which he and his bride lived separate lives and continued ignoring one another much as they had previously, Severus found himself with an actual wife.

Well, except for the sex, unfortunately.

She had moved herself, her cat, and everything she owned into his quarters, forcing him to make room at every turn. She had used her extensive knowledge of charms to coax the castle into expanding his quarters, which now boasted a bedroom just for her. *At least she didn't convert my private study into a bedroom*, Severus thought now, having learnt to be grateful for small mercies. Of course, that was probably because she wanted to ensure a place for all their combined books rather than out of any consideration for him. Not to mention the study was currently neither his nor private. ('*What's yours is mine*,' *indeed*, Severus thought with a snort).

Now, seeing that the sitting room was empty, he quietly shut the door behind himself and quickly crossed to his bedroom, only to jump when she said, "There you are, Severus! I was beginning to think you wouldn't be back in time for our tea with Neville and Lavender!"

Severus rolled his eyes. This was part two of Hermione's drive-Severus-crazy plan, he knew. After all, part one was no longer really anything special they would have had to pretend to be in love regardless, and it was probably better that she had begun that even before the law had passed. His lack of reciprocation, initially, had been put down to his usual surly, quiet nature. If *she* had been less demonstrative, however, it would have been harder to explain away. Not that Severus had ever thanked her for it, of course. She certainly mustn't discover that he didn't really mind all her kisses and hugs and smiles and touches. That would upset the balance of power far too much.

So now, she constantly nagged him into being social having tea with her friends and tolerating their inane conversations without hexing anyone. After all, she had pointed out, if he really *were* as in love with her as they were pretending, he would hardly upset her by hexing or even avoiding her friends, would he?

Why had he never realized how good she was at arguing people into corners?

Still, no matter how much Hermione tried to drive him crazy, she was certainly a far better wife than Trelawney would have been. Avoiding sex with Trelawney was worth his wife's ongoing campaign to irritate him.

Severus realized now, by the way she was glaring at him, that he hadn't actually answered her question, so he said (with as little sarcasm as he could manage), "Of course I'm planning to join you and your friends for tea. I wouldn't miss it for anything, my dear."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, but she apparently decided to let it go for now. They both knew he couldn't afford to risk anyone figuring out that their marriage was a sham. He wished she weren't quite so clever within minutes after they had announced their marriage, she had gleaned that his greatest fear was being snared by Trelawney. Whoever Hermione might get stuck with if their ruse were found out and their marriage annulled, they were both aware that it couldn't possibly be as bad as the risk that he would end up with Trelawney. After all, there were no more unmarried former Death Eaters gadding about, and who else did a member of the Golden Trio possibly have to fear?

As he sipped his tea, he watched his former students covertly. He just didn't see how any reasonably competent Arithmancer could have come up with an algorithm that would match this particular pair.

Severus would have sworn that Brown would try to run roughshod over Longbottom, creating misery for both of them, because her head had always been turned by

celebrity, not substance. Even Severus could admit that, as abysmal as Longbottom was at potion-making, he was a competent herbologist and had become a man of substance. When it came down to it, the easygoing facade got dropped and Longbottom's Gryffindor intractability would always win out. Thus, Brown would likely become a disappointed, bitter, nagging harpy, while Longbottom would suffer in quiet misery, but refuse to bow to his wife's pressure to do something more publicly laudable.

Which was a shame, really. Severus wouldn't wish that fate on any man, not even Hermione's more annoying friends – namely Potter and Weasley. Of all his wife's friends, in fact, Longbottom was now near the top of the list of those Severus found tolerable, so he rather hoped he might be wrong in his analysis and Brown also had some unsuspected depths to her character.

He very much doubted it, though.

As he sipped his tea, occasionally nodding or adding a pithy comment to the general conversation, he pondered some of the couples who had been matched by the law. As he considered it, most of the couples deemed "compatible" by the Marriage Law had Severus scratching his head. Ronald Weasley and Padma Patil? He had thought Patil had hated Weasley since their ill-fated Yule Ball experience in their fourth year.

Potter with Pansy Parkinson? Lovegood with Zabini? Charlie Weasley with Penelope Clearwater? Percy Weasley with Rosmerta? George Weasley with Bulstrode? These matches seemed to Severus to be ill-conceived at best.

Present day

Severus returned his attention to Serena, who was tugging on his sleeve. "Daddy, Uncle Draco's here!"

Turning, Severus noted that his godson had indeed arrived. He was surprised, though, to see Ginny with him. He greeted Draco, then said, "Ginevra, I wasn't expecting you, but it's good to see you in any event."

Serena said, "Uncle Draco, did you and Aunt Ginny get married 'cause of the law, too?"

Draco laughed. "You might say that, sprite. Aunt Ginny and I got married because we heard the law was coming and we wanted to be sure we'd be together."

"Oh, just like Daddy and Mummy," Serena said, nodding solemnly.

"What *have* you been telling this child, Severus?" Ginny asked Severus quietly. Severus supposed it was inevitable that his wife's closest friends would have been suspicious of their sudden marriage, and once the law had been repealed, Hermione would have had no reason not to tell them the truth of the matter. He wasn't going to confirm or deny, however.

Instead, he grouched, "She wanted to know about our wedding. What was I supposed to do?" He gave her a speaking look, daring her to shatter his daughter's romantic view of how her parents had gotten together.

"Oh," Ginny said. "I suppose that makes sense." She apparently realized that Hermione would be very upset if her daughter learned that her parents had once actively disliked each other. "What have you told her?"

"That we couldn't resist getting married, we decided to do it ourselves in Gretna Green because the Ministry was going to enact the law, and that we were glad we did it."

"Oh, fair enough." Ginny smiled. "I'm glad you told her the truth, such as it is." She winked and let the subject drop. "Now, as it's your tenth anniversary, and you only get one of those, Draco and I have decided to bring Serena back to our place and stay the night so that you and Hermione may have a private celebration." When Severus began to protest – he didn't like letting his baby go anywhere with anyone, really – she added, "You know she'll have a good time with Scorpius, and Lucius was saying just the other day that he hasn't seen her in ages. He *is* her godfather, you know." Severus had secured Hermione's agreement to that arrangement by manipulating her into a wager of sorts. It wasn't *his* fault that she hadn't heard about Minerva's impending retirement quite as early as he had, was it?

"All right, fine," Severus gave in with as much grace as he could muster. "As long as Hermione says it's all right."

Just then, Hermione came out of their bedroom in a sleek silver sheath, leaving Severus speechless and rather pleased that he would have her all to himself for the whole night. She smiled, correctly interpreting his expression, and thanked him with her eyes before she asked, "As long as Hermione says what's all right?"

Draco said, "We'd like to keep Serena for the night, if you don't mind. Give you and Sev some time alone."

"Thanks, that sounds great," Hermione said, but Severus frowned. "What? You don't like the idea?"

"No, it's not that," Severus replied irritably. "I was just wondering how many times I have to ask my godson not to call me Sev."

Hermione laughed. "You may as well give that up as a lost cause. He'll never stop, especially now that he knows how much it irritates you."

Ginny said, "We'll just get Serena's things together and be on our way. You should get going, though, or you'll be late."

Glancing at the clock, Severus realized Ginny was correct. He kissed his daughter good night, then helped Hermione with her wrap, slid his arms around her, and Apparated them away.

During the interval, Severus brought his wife's hand to his lips. "Are you enjoying yourself, love?"

"Yes, it's wonderful," she replied, smiling. "Remember the first time we saw it?"

"Our first anniversary. How could I forget?" he murmured.

Nine years ago

To keep up appearances, Hermione had insisted that they must mark their first anniversary publicly. Trelawney had been pushing to have the Ministry look more closely at all marriages that had happened just prior to the Marriage Law. She claimed to have foreseen doom for all of Wizarding Britain if even a single sham marriage were allowed to stand.

The inquiries had begun just this week. They were going alphabetically, and there were more than a hundred to get through, so Severus assumed it would be weeks or months before they got to the Snapes. Still, he had been forced to agree that ignoring their anniversary would not help their cause. They needed to be public about "celebrating" it.

When Hermione suggested a night out in Muggle London, Severus agreed. He left it to her to make their anniversary arrangements, and she informed him that they were going to see a Shakespeare revival and then to a late supper. She suggested that he put it about that he was surprising her and swear a few people to secrecy. That way, she said, they could be sure that word of their activities would reach the right ears when the time came.

The funny thing was, he would be utterly content with his marriage – public displays of affection, tea with dunderheads and all – except for one thing: the sex. Or, more accurately, the *lack* of sex. Though he would never admit it aloud, her attempts to goad him were actually rather amusing. He thoroughly enjoyed the mischievous sparkle in her eyes when she did or said something outrageous. When his response was particularly witty, she would flush a becoming pink and purse her lips to keep from laughing.

He often found himself thinking how utterly kissable she looked. More than once, he found himself reduced to mentally reciting the twelve uses of Dragon's blood or the recipe for Shrinking Solution in order to regain control over his suddenly overactive libido.

He wasn't quite sure when it had happened, and it certainly surprised him as much as anyone, but he found himself desiring more intimate physical contact with his wife. The kisses and touches and hugs of their public life had become his own private torture. What on earth had possessed him to suggest a celibate marriage? And why had he agreed to let her add that stupid bedroom to his quarters? If they were sleeping in the same bed, he was sure he could manage to seduce her without tipping her off that that was what he was doing. But with separate bedrooms, he was doomed.

Their first anniversary arrived, and though he had been somewhat skeptical, Severus thoroughly enjoyed the play. He suspected that Hermione was somehow making a statement about their marriage, though he wasn't sure which of them was meant to be the shrew, and he refused to rise to her bait by asking her.

Afterward, over dinner and two bottles of wine, they discussed the play and the actors and debated whether the rumor that Shakespeare was a wizard had any truth to them.

Then, in the blink of an eye, Hermione suddenly turned serious. "Severus, do you suppose we'll convince them that our marriage is real?"

"Of course, why wouldn't we?" Severus asked, surprised by the change of subject.

"It's just... well..." Hermione seemed embarrassed. "My mother commented to me once that you can always tell when people who are in the same room are sleeping together."

Hermione had never managed to find her parents after the war, Severus knew, which probably accounted for the slight hitch in her voice when she mentioned either one of them. She was still looking, even after all this time, and he found himself keeping his tone gentle whenever they came up in conversation. This time was no different. "You must have been very young when you had that conversation, Hermione."

"Not really not all that young," Hermione said softly. "It was one of the last conversations we had before... well, *before*. She wanted to talk to me about birth control, and I asked why she thought I needed it. That was when Ron was with Lavender. She had seen us all together at King's Cross when they picked me up after Sixth Year. She said that she could see Ron and Lavender were *involved*, and she supposed that meant I should be prepared, too. I asked how she knew Ron and Lavender were involved that way, and she said, 'I can just tell. There's a certain kind of energy in the room when two lovers are present. It was there between Ron and Lavender. You're the same age, so I have to assume you'll be getting involved with someone yourself, soon.'" Hermione paused. "I thought she was insane, at the time, but now I'm not so sure. I knew immediately, the first time I saw Draco and Ginny together after they did it for the first time."

Severus thought before answering. Inwardly, he was rejoicing he might get to slake his desire, after all! And if he made it really good for her, maybe she would want to keep doing it! Outwardly, he remained impassive; eventually, he cast a Silencing Charm around them and asked carefully, "So you think that if we don't have sex before the Ministry gets around to investigating us, we'll be found out?"

"I think it's a possibility we should discuss." She watched him for a moment, as if trying to discern his thoughts. When he said nothing, she ventured, "Whatever we think of one another, sex is certainly preferable to having the entire world realize we've been lying all this time. And based on the matches the Ministry has been making, I have to think I'm more content with you than I would be with anyone they'd come up with! I'm surprised none of my friends has snapped and killed someone every single one of them, save Ginny, is completely miserable! And Ginny and Draco married before the law took effect!" Lucius, having decided that even a Weasley was a better choice than a Muggle-born, had nudged Draco into persuading Ginny to marry him shortly before the law took effect. The pair had followed Severus and Hermione's example and slipped off to Gretna Green with just two days to spare. Fortunately, the pair had already been dating for a few weeks; combined with Lucius's selective application of the right pressure on the appropriate officials, that fact had resulted in the Ministry not looking too closely into their marriage.

"True," Severus agreed now. Hermione's comment about Marriage Law matches wasn't inaccurate, in his opinion. He decided to be more blunt about the situation than he had been to date. "I've been thinking the same thing myself. The first time I considered that their algorithm might be faulty, as you know, was when I persuaded you to marry me. As I saw the various matches coming out, I became more convinced I had been right not to let the Ministry have a say in who I married." He sighed. "I hate to say it, but I think Sibyll was somehow involved in developing the algorithm."

"Trelawney? That old fraud? How would she? And why?"

"I don't mean to sound egotistical, Hermione, but the fact is, she's been trying to convince me we were fated to be together since before you were born." He decided to give her all the facts in hopes of solidifying her apparent belief that they should have sex rather sooner than later. She would make a stronger ally if she knew what they were up against, and she had already admitted she was content to stay with him. "Do you remember a few days before we were married, when you were talking about the proposed law at dinner? With Longbottom?"

"You were *listening*?" She sounded affronted at the very notion. "Is *that* how you found out about the law?"

"Yes," Severus said impatiently, "but that's not the point. The point is that Sibyll was listening, too, and she looked smug when I caught her eye."

"Suspicious, but hardly conclusive," Hermione said.

"True, but then even with all his money and influence, Lucius couldn't manage to find out who created the algorithm. He also couldn't manage to get the Ministry to drop the whole idea."

"Are you suggesting that Sibyll Trelawney has more influence than Lucius Malfoy?"

"If she approached them correctly, then yes, she would."

"How?"

"You *are* aware how much stock they place in prophecies, are you not?"

"Well, yes, but how would that affect the algorithm? She's no Arithmancer."

"No, but a second prophecy would take care of that, wouldn't it? She could prophesy that the Arithmancer made an error that must be corrected in private. Or perhaps she somehow got hold of it and changed it herself, or bribed or blackmailed someone into doing it for her. There are any number of ways for a determined Seer to change things to suit herself."

"Perhaps," Hermione allowed. They were silent, each pondering the situation for several minutes as they finished their pudding. At last, Hermione said, "Returning to my original point, which you haven't really addressed, what do you propose we do about the sex question?"

"Assuming what you say is true that anyone who's looking carefully will be able to tell I don't see any way around it. We'll simply have to consummate the marriage."

"I agree," Hermione said. "Let's go."

Severus felt his lip twitch. "Impatient, are we?"

"No time like the present. Let's go." She was starting to look irritated, so Severus decided a wise man would shut his mouth and go.

Being a wise man, that's exactly what he did.

That first night ...

Chapter 3 of 6

A seemingly simple question from Severus and Hermione's young daughter on their anniversary sends Severus meandering down memory lane.

A/N: Many thanks to everyone who has reviewed. Hope you enjoy this chapter! :)

III. That First Night ...

Present day

As they once again ate dinner after the theater, chatting about the performances and comparing this version to the one they had seen nine years ago, Severus marveled at how far they had come since that first night together as true husband and wife. Hermione must have caught something in his eye she was much better at reading minuscule changes in his expressions than she had been back then because she stopped mid-sentence and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

He gave her a half-smile. "I was just remembering that first night together."

"You're feeling rather nostalgic tonight, aren't you?" she laughed. "Whatever made you think of that fiasco?"

"Serena was asking me earlier about anniversaries and why we got married."

"She was? What did you tell her?"

"The palatable version of the truth, of course."

Hermione smiled, and he knew she was thinking of a particularly hormonal meltdown during her pregnancy, when she had wailed that she wouldn't know what to say when their daughter asked about the beginning of their relationship. Severus had done his best to soothe her, telling her that the story didn't sound so bad when told properly. When she had sniffed and said she didn't want to make a habit of lying to her child, he had told her the story, without a single outright falsehood, in a way that sounded rather more romantic than miserable.

Hermione laughed suddenly. "Thank Merlin children never want to know about their parents' sex lives!" she exclaimed. "That first night ..."

"I know," Severus said ruefully.

Nine years well, technically, eight years plus three hundred sixty-four days earlier

They arrived back from the theater shortly after midnight, and immediately, everything felt incredibly awkward. The rather comfortable way they had developed of dealing with one another disappeared, and they looked at each other uncertainly.

Severus suddenly felt like an inexperienced adolescent hoping this was the night he would lose his virginity. Strangely, he felt a bit better when Hermione blurted, "Well, how shall we begin, then?"

Amused, Severus said formally, "Kissing is where most people start, I believe."

"Right," Hermione said, and then stretched up to kiss him so suddenly that he was caught off guard and banged his nose on her forehead. Unfortunately, it started bleeding. "Sorry," Hermione said, looking chagrined. "Guess you weren't quite ready." She waved her wand and an ice pack appeared. Handy trick, that, Severus thought, suddenly rather pleased that he had chosen a Charms Mistress for his wife.

"No, apparently not," Severus said, squeezing his nose with one hand until Hermione brushed it away and replaced it with the ice pack.

"Sit down, Severus," she said, nudging him toward an armchair. "Relax. We'll get this sorted and then have the rest of the night." He sat.

They got the nosebleed to stop, and with a bit more practice, the kissing was going along splendidly. Hermione moved onto Severus's lap, and his cock began enthusiastically waving its support for this new activity. Everything, in fact, seemed to be going splendidly, despite the rocky beginning, and Severus tentatively moved his hand to cup her breast. Hermione turned slightly, seemingly to grant him easier access, then suddenly pulled back to yell, "OW!"

"What? What is it?" Severus asked, panicked. He was hardly even touching her how had he hurt her? Was he moving too fast?

"My hair!" Hermione said, thankfully more quietly, though her tone was strained. "I think it's caught in your buttons." Glancing down, he saw she was right. He couldn't imagine how that had happened, but there it was.

It took them ten minutes, in which Hermione grew increasingly bossy and Severus increasingly irritated, before her hair was finally free. They stared at one another for a minute before Severus said formally, "Might I suggest moving this to a bed and removing our clothing before we continue?"

Hermione giggled, and just like that, the mood relaxed again. "Good idea. Between my hair and your hundreds of buttons, we're a menace."

He felt his lip twitch in response. "Apparently so." Hermione stood, grabbed his hand, and tugged him to his feet. He willingly followed her to the bedroom, unbuttoning his coat and shirt as they went. He wondered why she wasn't doing the same, then realized she must have used magic to zip herself into her dress, as the zipper was in back and unless she was some sort of contortionist, she wouldn't have been able to reach it. He shrugged out of his coat and shirt, then stepped up behind her. "Allow me," he murmured, beginning to ease the zipper down as he kissed her neck.

Moments later, he realized he should have watched what he was doing. The zipper, currently right in the middle of Hermione's back, seemed hopelessly snagged and unwilling to move in either direction. When she realized what was happening, Hermione groaned and put her face in her hands. "Maybe this is a sign," she moaned, her voice slightly muffled by her hands.

No! She can't back out when we're so close to ... "It's not a sign," Severus said firmly. "If we allowed it to be a sign, that would be like admitting Divination might have some merit. You wouldn't want Sibyll to have that sort of victory, would you?"

"Nooo," Hermione admitted, dropping her hands and glancing back at him. "But you have to admit, this isn't going as smoothly as one might hope."

Severus shrugged. "When does anything, really? We'll get there, and everything will be fine." As if to prove his words, the zipper suddenly sprang free. He smirked at her. "See? If you want to believe in signs, believe that one!" Fortunately, the zipper had continued downward rather than moving back up.

Hermione grinned. "You're just horny now, aren't you?"

Severus saw no harm in admitting it. "Naturally. Up until a few moments ago, I had an attractive, willing witch squirming around on my lap, which has led me to hope that in a few more moments, I'll have an attractive, willing woman rolling around with me in our bed. Show me a wizard who wouldn't be turned on by that, and I'll show you a gay wizard."

Hermione laughed, seemingly pleased, and let her dress fall from her shoulders to pool at her feet. Severus had the urge to pick her up and toss her on the bed. He quickly unfastened his trousers and let them fall to his feet, then stepped forward, pushing her gently back onto the bed.

Things were progressing very nicely until a very unwelcome voice sounded from the Floo. "Severus?" the voice called. "Are you there? Severus?" Severus groaned, then banged his forehead repeatedly on the pillow next to Hermione's head.

"Do you think she'll believe we aren't here?" Severus murmured in Hermione's ear.

"At this hour on a school night? Not likely she knows you too well. And it's probably important, so you'd better see what she wants." It technically wasn't a school night, of course, being Friday, but he was scheduled to chaperone a Hogsmeade weekend tomorrow, so her point applied anyway.

"Coming, Minerva," Severus called. He stood and grabbed his dressing gown. Hermione likewise stood and began putting on *his* shirt. "What are you doing?" he hissed. "Do you *want* her to know what she interrupted?"

"Yes, actually, I *do*," Hermione hissed back. "It can't hurt when they start investigating our marriage, can it?"

He couldn't argue that point, he supposed. "Fine, then. But button that up before you come out." He headed back into the sitting room. "You've caught me at a rather inopportune moment, Minerva. I assume this is urgent?" Hermione drifted out of the bedroom, still buttoning his shirt. Severus absently noted that it did more for her, visually speaking, than it ever had for him; he resolved to encourage her to wear it around their quarters frequently. He could always say one never knew when someone would Floo, who could then bear witness to how very real their marriage was ...

He realized Minerva had been speaking while he had been ogling his wife when she asked impatiently, "Severus, have you heard anything I just said?"

"No," he admitted. "As I said, we were in the middle of something. It's taking me a moment to regroup." Minerva flushed with embarrassment and greeted Hermione, who had by now tucked herself under Severus's arm and was snuggling up against his side.

"I apologize, Hermione," Minerva said gamely. "As I was saying, I need to borrow your husband for a bit. Two of his students were caught out after curfew, and I can't get them to confess what they were doing. They were lurking near Argus's office, and now Argus can't find Mrs. Norris, so he's beside himself. I'm sorry, Severus, but perhaps you'll have a bit more luck than I've had."

Severus sighed. Sometimes, his life seemed like a great cosmic joke. "All right, Minerva, I'll be right there." She disappeared, and Severus turned to Hermione. "Please tell me we can pick this up when I return. Or are you hoping that Minerva's testimony will obviate the need for us to actually have sex?"

"No, of course not!" Hermione said, as though it should be obvious. "Her testimony will be helpful, of course, but it doesn't negate my mother's point, does it?" She shook her head. "I'll be waiting in your bed *naked* so *do* hurry, please."

Severus groaned and dropped a kiss on her lips. He summoned his trousers and coat, then said, "I believe I'll need that shirt you're wearing, madam, although I admit it looks significantly more interesting on you."

She gave him a cheeky grin and began unbuttoning the shirt. He quickly donned his trousers, then waited as she slipped the shirt from her shoulders and handed it to him. As he put it on, he realized it had absorbed her scent, and his erection, which had subsided while he spoke with Minerva, reasserted itself forcefully. For the first time ever, he seriously contemplated murdering students. It didn't help that Hermione was now sashaying, stark naked, toward the bedroom, calling over her shoulder, "Minerva's waiting, dear."

Half an hour later, Severus had sorted everything to his satisfaction. Of course, the miscreants had lost Slytherin five hundred and sixty points, and earned themselves twenty-eight days of detention due to their stubbornness. He had arrived in Minerva's office, seen the usual two culprits (one of Zabini's young cousins and his best friend, Alexander Nott), and said, "Your misbehavior has pulled me away from my wife in the middle of the night. You will lose ten points from Slytherin and earn a day of detention with Mr. Filch for each and every minute this takes, beginning now." He looked at the clock, which read one-thirty-two a.m.

They had stared at him in shock, probably because he had never been so strict or so punitive with anyone in their house before, no matter what they might have done. And he had always removed his students from the Headmistress's presence when punishment was called for.

He said, "I'm waiting." He glanced pointedly at the clock. "I believe that's twenty points and one detention." They sputtered in protest, and he said, "Oh, did I fail to mention it would be ten points *each* per minute?"

They both started talking so fast that he had to stop them to understand what they were saying. Mrs. Norris was restored to Mr. Filch and the boys returned to their dormitory in record time. Minerva had seemed rather impressed with his efficiency. Severus could only hope this didn't mean he'd get more late-night Floo calls.

When he stepped into his bedroom, his eyes immediately sought his wife. They found her, and she *was* naked, but unfortunately, she was also sound asleep. He debated waking her, but decided that after a year of marriage, a few more hours wouldn't make much difference.

He was definitely going to pick up where he had left off in first thing in the morning, though.

Morning comes early

A seemingly simple question from Severus and Hermione's young daughter on their anniversary sends Severus meandering down memory lane.

IV. Morning Comes Early

Present day

They arrived home late, as they had nine years ago. This time, however, the silence wasn't at all awkward. A bit odd, perhaps, in the sense that Serena wasn't home, but entirely comfortable nevertheless.

Hermione asked, "I was thinking of having a hot bath. Care to join me?"

Severus smiled slightly. "Naturally. You know I never turn down an opportunity to soak with you."

She grinned. "True. At least, you haven't in years."

He chuckled. "Not since *that* morning."

She giggled. "Exactly."

Eight years plus three hundred sixty-three days plus seventeen hours earlier

Morning came rather too early for Severus. It had taken him hours to fall asleep, or so it had seemed. Unresolved arousal was really bad for relaxation, Severus had realized as he lay beside his naked, sleeping, almost-not-in-name-only wife. He had finally been forced to resort to taking a shower and taking care of his problem the way he had been doing for months. When he was done, he had returned to bed and finally managed to fall into a restless sleep.

As awareness returned, he suddenly remembered his plans for the morning and began feeling much more cheerful. Opening his eyes, he turned toward Hermione's side of the bed, only to find it empty. Where was she? His good mood deflated as rapidly as it had arisen mere moments earlier. Rising, he went to look for his wife.

He found her in the bathroom, soaking in a tub of rose-scented bubbles. He cleared his throat, and she looked up and smiled. "Good morning," she purred. "Care to join me?"

"No, thank you," he said stiffly.

"Are you sure?" she teased.

"I do *not* take rose-scented baths," Severus said. He was aware that he sounded like a cranky child, but he couldn't seem to control his disappointment at finding her anywhere but his bed this morning.

Hermione grinned, seemingly unfazed by his mood which was probably because she knew he wasn't a morning person, and therefore wasn't taking his irritation personally. "I could drain this and run another bath with a different scent," she cajoled. "How about patchouli? Or vanilla?" He shook his head. "Almond?"

"I'd prefer it if you returned to bed for a while," he admitted finally. "I thought you wanted to ... er ..." She looked at him expectantly, but didn't say anything. "Consume the marriage," he finally managed.

"Oh, I thought you might rather wait until tonight," Hermione said. "We have students to chaperone in Hogsmeade today."

Severus groaned. "That's hours away, Hermione. We have plenty of time, if you'd just come back to bed." He was so horny now that he wasn't even embarrassed at the whine in his voice.

Hermione said, "Are you sure you wouldn't rather join me here? Hot baths are very relaxing, and you look rather tense."

"Look, if you've changed your mind, just say so," Severus snapped, his temper getting the better of him for a moment. Her eyes narrowed, and since he didn't want to start a fight, he held up a hand in apology. "I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault, but I had hoped ..." he let his voice trail off. "Never mind, I guess it's not going to happen this morning. I'll see you later." He left her alone, deciding to head out to the sitting room and distract himself with some tea until she was finished, then take another shower and take care of his problem himself once more.

He hoped this was just a delay, not a change of heart on her part. It would be unbearably cruel of her to get his hopes up and then dash them permanently. He consoled himself by reminding himself that her mother's point still held, just as much as it ever had.

Moments later, Hermione came into the sitting room. She was once again wearing his shirt, and Severus suppressed a groan. He began striding toward the bathroom for that shower.

He had just passed her when her voice stopped him in his tracks. "I was thinking of going back to bed for a while. Care to join me?"

He turned to look at her, his heart suddenly pounding, and he had to restrain himself from tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her, caveman style, to bed. "I would like that above all things," he assured her fervently.

She smiled. "All right, then." She took his hand and pulled him, unresisting, into the bedroom. She spelled his shirt off of herself, then yanked the tie from his dressing gown and pushed the garment off his shoulders. Lying on the bed, she said, "I believe I was about here when we were so rudely interrupted last night. Remind me, Severus, where were you?"

He couldn't restrain a grin, and she caught her breath as she watched him prowl toward her. He settled himself over her and murmured, "I believe I was right about here."

She smiled. "So you were."

Fortunately, this time they managed just fine, without any mishaps or interruptions.

Afterward, Severus held Hermione in bed, stroking her bushy hair as she rested her head on his chest. After a while, she said, "Severus?"

"Yes?"

"How about we take that bath now? I promise you'll love it," she cajoled.

He smiled and kissed the top of her head. "As long as it's not a floral scent, I'm willing to give it a go."

She turned to grin up at him. "Afraid your big, bad Potions Master persona would suffer if you wore the delicate scent of lilacs?"

"Perhaps not, after what I did last night," he said, remembering almost fondly his creative way of getting the budding criminals to confess.

"What did you do?" Hermione asked.

"Ten points each from Slytherin and a detention with Filch," he began.

"Really?" Hermione broke in. "That sounds rather minor to me."

"Because you didn't let me finish," Severus pointed out, giving her a slight squeeze for emphasis. "As I was saying, ten points each from Slytherin and a detention with Argus for every minute it took to resolve the issue."

Hermione giggled. "All right, you win, that's pretty harsh, after all. Does Slytherin have any points left?" she added skeptically.

"Very few, actually," Severus said. "And I have to believe twenty-eight detentions with Argus will keep them in line regardless of what scent I wear."

Hermione grinned, then kissed him and jumped out of bed. "Lilacs it is, then," she called over her shoulder as she hied herself off to the bathroom.

"Hermione!" he protested, leaping from bed to chase her. He was relieved to discover she had been teasing, as she held up an almond scented bath salt for his approval when he arrived.

As she had predicted, he discovered he liked baths very much indeed so long as his very squirmy wife was in the tub with him.

Present day

Severus was pulled from his reminiscences by Hermione's voice calling to him, suggesting that he should join her in the tub before it got cold. He hurriedly began stripping as he obeyed.

When he arrived, she was already in the tub. She had chosen a spicy scent this evening he identified cinnamon and nutmeg, among others. With her face pink and her hair trailing from its clasp atop her head, she looked as alluring as he had ever seen her. He paused in the middle of disrobing to lean down and kiss her. "Marrying you was the smartest thing I ever did," he told her.

Her answering smile was a touch wicked. "You mean, *blackmailing* me into marrying you was the smartest thing you ever did."

"That's not fair," he protested. "I didn't actually blackmail you. I invoked a life debt, which is not the same thing."

Her smile widened. "If you insist, dear." She kissed him briefly. "Anyway, suggesting we should have sex was the smartest thing I ever did," she said as he moved away to remove his remaining clothing. He didn't respond until he had joined her in the tub. He settled himself behind her and began leisurely rubbing bubbles into her abdomen.

"I won't argue with you there, love," he said finally. "But I *will* point out that had I not invoked the life debt, we wouldn't have gotten round to that for a long time, if ever. I'd have wound up married to Sibyll, and you'd have been stuck with some unworthy dunderhead, at least until some poor sod murdered his or her very incompatible, Ministry-sanctioned spouse, thus bringing to light all Sibyll's misdeeds."

She stroked his hand, which was now wandering further afield than her abdomen. "Perhaps. Or maybe we were destined to be together either way ..."

Eight and a half years ago

Six months after the consummation of their marriage, the Ministry finally got around to investigating Severus and Hermione. After nearly a week of interviews with the couple as well as a number of their friends and co-workers, the Ministry clerk wrapped things up. "You dears don't have a thing to worry about," she told them as she took her leave. "It's quite obvious that you're well and truly married, not perpetrating a fraud on the Ministry."

"Thank you, Mrs. Merriwether," Hermione said politely.

"You'll receive official notification next week, but that's a formality. No one who sees you together could possibly doubt how deeply in love you are."

Severus froze internally, though he managed to keep his facade neutral as always. After the woman left, he excused himself, saying he had to check a potion's progress and would return shortly. When he arrived at his lab, he began pacing anxiously. In love? They weren't *really* in love, were they? Severus didn't want to be in love. He had been in love before, and it hadn't worked out well for him.

He had no idea how long he had been pacing when Hermione showed up. She said, "Here you are! I was getting worried! I couldn't imagine how checking on a potion could possibly take almost four hours and make you miss dinner."

"Oh," Severus said, his mind still trying to process the possibility that he might be in love with his wife. "I ... er ... that is ..."

"It's all right, Severus," Hermione said gently. "I know why you're so upset."

"You do?" he asked, hoping she could explain it to him.

"Yes, and it's all right," she said. "I know you aren't in love with me, and it's really okay. I never expected you to be."

"But ..." Severus began, then stopped, not sure what he wanted to say. It just sounded wrong when Hermione said he wasn't in love with her.

"It's all right," she said again. "And you don't have to worry about me, either. I accept that you still love Harry's mother, and will never love me."

That sounded *really* wrong, Severus thought. "Why would you accept that?" he asked irritably. "Why *should* you? You *deserve* someone who's in love with you, you know."

"I know," she said, a bit wistfully. "I *do* deserve someone who's in love with me. But I *want* you, even if you don't love me."

"What if ..." he began, then stopped again. "Why would you want me?"

Hermione sighed, her eyes sad. "Mrs. Merriwether was half right, at least. Even if you're not in love with me, I'm in love with you. And I know you care about me, more than you care about anyone else who's alive, so that will have to be enough."

"No, it won't!" Severus protested hotly.

"What, you're going to leave me because I admitted I love you?" Hermione asked, looking stricken.

"No, you foolish woman, you won't have to settle for me just caring about you!" he sneered. "I love you, too!"

"You do?" Hermione looked stunned.

"Well, of course I do! I'm not an idiot! Marrying you was the smartest thing I ever did, even if I didn't know it at the time."

A flash of relief crossed her features briefly before Hermione frowned. "I hate to quibble, but don't you mean blackmailing me into marrying you?"

"I didn't *blackmail* you!" Severus protested before he caught the twinkle of mischief in her eyes. "I invoked a *life debt*! There's a difference!"

Hermione was smiling broadly now, and she suddenly launched herself into his arms. He found himself holding her tight as she whispered, "If you say so, Severus." She kissed him before he could respond, and by the time they stopped, he had altogether forgotten to continue to argue his position.

Still, it was such a frequent argument that it eventually became something of an inside joke.

The absurdity of it

Chapter 5 of 6

A seemingly simple question from Severus and Hermione's young daughter on their anniversary sends Severus meandering down memory lane.

5. The Absurdity of It

Present day

"Sibyll was so very *disappointed* when she realized we were truly in love and happy together," Hermione mused a while later as the water lapped around their very relaxed bodies. "It almost seemed like overkill to loose the Ministry investigators on her."

"She deserved everything she got," Severus said firmly. "Just think of the mess she made of all your friends' lives with her false prophecies and faulty algorithm."

"True," Hermione conceded. "Fortunately, they're all sorted out, now, and everyone's with the right people."

"So it would seem," Severus said. He sighed. "I suppose we ought to get some sleep. Draco and Ginevra are certain to bring Serena home early."

"Do you think so?" Hermione asked. "I rather thought they wanted us to have some alone time."

"Yes, but she'll almost certainly have worn them out by breakfast. Especially with Scorpius around to join whatever mischief she cooks up."

"You're probably right," Hermione admitted. They exited the tub, drying each other and themselves, then headed for bed. "How tired are you?" Hermione asked, running her hand down his chest.

"Not *that* tired," Severus admitted, just before he claimed her lips with his.

Seven years ago

Severus was in the sitting room, sipping some tea and reading the Quibbler on the third anniversary of the enactment of the Marriage Law while he waited for Hermione to go to breakfast with him. Luna Lovegood had apparently decided it was time to take on the Ministry, because the headline screamed, "Nearly All Pre-Marriage Law Unions Ruled Valid," with a picture of Draco laughing with his wife. The article mentioned a few specific marriages, including his and Hermione's, as well as some of the longstanding matches that had come about long before the Marriage Law had even been contemplated, as evidence that people seemed perfectly capable of finding compatible matches on their own.

Another article proclaimed, "A Law Gone Horribly Wrong: Can a Good Algorithm Make So Many Mismatches?" There were pictures of a number of Weasleys, along with several other people who had fallen prey to the Law. Severus read both articles with some interest.

The gist of the first article, it seemed, was that, after the big fuss that had been raised about the pre-Marriage Law unions, the Ministry discovered that some ninety percent of those marriages were genuine, and nearly all of individuals involved were, by all accounts, very happy with their partners.

This would have been fine, really, except for the contrast with the Ministry-sanctioned matches, whose satisfaction rate was far lower. A follow-up study, financed by war hero Harry Potter, showed that almost none of the Ministry-sanctioned couples had even managed to last the first year under the same roof. In fact, most of the individuals involved were by now, only three years after the Marriage Law had passed, cohabiting with people other than their spouses. Some of them even had children with their current partners.

The article gave a number of examples: Ronald Weasley had twin girls with Lavender Brown, while Charlie Weasley had returned to Romania, where he and his girlfriend, a Durmstrang graduate, were raising their young son together. Meanwhile, Charlie's wife, Penelope, had reunited with her former boyfriend, her husband's brother Percy. Rosmerta had returned to the single life, although she was so frequently seen in the company of Pansy Parkinson that rumour had it they were an item. Pansy's husband, Harry Potter, was happily living in sin with his pregnant girlfriend, who also happened to publish the Quibbler, and their eighteen month old son. In an editorial, Luna eloquently suggested that the Ministry might want to consider checking its Arithmancy, as it was hard to believe a correct algorithm could get so many matches so far wrong. Neville Longbottom, though unable to cohabit with a woman other than his wife because of his position at Hogwarts, spent nearly every spare moment with the heavily pregnant Hannah Abbott, who had her own little cottage in Hogsmeade.

Just as Severus was thinking how fortunate he was to have escaped the 'assistance' of the Ministry in choosing his spouse, Hermione came into the room. Seeing the newspaper, she asked, "Any news worth knowing?" She poured herself some tea and waited for his response.

"Miss Lovegood has taken on the Marriage Law."

"Really?" Hermione sounded delighted. "It would be wonderful if they would repeal it. My friends would all be able to marry their children's other parents."

"I think the Ministry will find it impossible to ignore this report. She names names."

"Oh, that's terrific," Hermione said happily. "Are you ready to go to breakfast? I'm famished."

"Of course," Severus said, putting the paper aside.

Over the next several weeks, Severus and Hermione followed the unfolding story as avidly as the rest of Wizarding Britain did. Vector was hired as a Ministry consultant to review the algorithm, and mere weeks later, she announced that it was so flawed that she had serious questions as to whether any Arithmancy at all even the most basic Arithmancy taught to third-year students at Hogwarts had been involved in its creation. She said it was no wonder it didn't work she couldn't make heads or tails of it.

The article then said Vector had sent the algorithm to a colleague at Beauxbaton, who had sent it back with a letter accusing Vector of wasting her time, as no government would possibly have adopted that mess to match pets with owners, let alone grooms with brides.

Upon reading this, Severus joked, "I bet it would make sense if they plugged me in with Sibyll."

Hermione laughed. "We should ask Septima to try it."

Severus rolled his eyes, but Hermione must have done so, because the very next day, the Quibbler headline asked "Did Purported Seer Invent Algorithm and Prophecy in Thwarted Attempt to Snare Obsession?"

Severus wasn't thrilled to see his own scowling face next to a photo of Sibyll, but he felt vindicated when the article concluded that Sibyll Trelawney appeared to have perpetrated a fraud on the Ministry and should be prosecuted.

Bowing to pressure several days later, the Ministry issued an arrest warrant for Sibyll Trelawney.

Present day

Morning came, and Severus woke, as he had nearly every morning for the past nine years, wrapped around his wife. Even when they argued and went to sleep on opposite sides of the bed, they somehow migrated toward each other in their sleep, and they woke up spooned or, like today, with her head on his chest or stomach and his arms holding her close.

He was just debating mentally whether they had time to have a little fun before the other light of his life returned home when Hermione stirred and stretched, then snuggled in closer. "Morning," she mumbled. Severus decided that Lucius wouldn't allow Serena to leave Malfoy Manor until she had had some breakfast. He stroked a hand down Hermione's back, making her shiver. He felt her smile as she asked, "I can only suppose last night didn't quite do it?"

He grinned into her hair. "I can never quite get enough of you, love."

She seemed pleased, if the kiss he received in response was any indication. He took that as permission to continue with his attentions, and soon he had her writhing and demanding that he move harder and faster before she finally came apart in his arms.

Soon enough, he was spent, too, and as he dozed, he recalled how his beautiful daughter had come into his life.

Three years, nine and a half months earlier

Six years into their marriage, Severus began to wonder if the seven year itch he had heard about was really a six year itch. Hermione had been quiet and withdrawn for the past month or so, and Severus was quietly panicking that perhaps she was finally coming to her senses and realizing she deserved someone younger, handsomer, and *better* than him.

He tried to think when it had all started. Their last anniversary, not quite three months ago, had been perfectly fine. Really, the entire five years since they had made their marriage real had been a dream, except for the last month. What could have gone wrong?

Finally, he came home early one evening to find Hermione crying in the sitting room. She quickly tried to wipe her eyes. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's fine," she said, just as she had been insisting for weeks. This time, though, he couldn't let it go. He was tired of waiting for her to tell him what was bothering her, and he couldn't take the stress of waiting for her to say she was leaving him.

"Whatever I did, please just tell me so I can apologize and we can get back to normal," he begged. She shook her head sadly, so he added, "Hermione, if you don't love me anymore, just say so. I can take it. What I can't handle is watching you drift further away every single day, and not being able to stop it happening."

She gasped, her eyes flying to his. "You think I don't love you?"

"What am I supposed to think?" he asked tiredly. "You avoid me as much as you possibly can, you ignore me when you can't avoid me, and when I ask you what's wrong, you tell me everything's fine. What am I supposed to think?" he asked again.

"Not *that*," she said emphatically. "*Never* think that. I love you more than *anything* more than I ever have."

"Then please, *talk* to me," he said again. "Whatever it is, we can deal with it, we can fix it, if you just tell me what it is. Just talk to me," he begged.

"It's ... I don't know how to say it, Severus. We never discussed it, never talked about it. I have no idea how you're going to react, and I'm terrified that you're going to get angry and make me choose. And I can't. I can't choose."

"Hermione, you're not making sense, love. What haven't we talked about? And why would I make you choose unless ... is there someone else you love, too?" Icy fear encased his heart at the mere thought.

"Not like *that*, Severus," she assured him, her voice ringing with such sincerity that the ice melted away. "I could never love anyone else the way I love you. Gods, I hope you aren't too upset about this ..." her voice trailed off and she whispered, "I'm pregnant."

He couldn't possibly have heard her correctly. All this angst because she was pregnant? The absurdity of it hit him suddenly, followed closely by the strongest sense of relief he had ever felt. She still loved him! She wasn't leaving him! They were having a baby! He began to laugh.

He laughed harder at the shock on her face. "What?" she demanded crossly. "What's so funny?"

"All this angst because you're pregnant?" he gasped, sitting down on the sofa beside her and pulling her stiff body close. He kissed her cheek and spoke gently.

"Hermione, sweetheart, I was an active participant in the activities that got you pregnant, and I'm not an idiot. I know those activities have been known to lead to pregnancy even if we had carefully taken precautions every single time, which you must admit, we didn't. Why would I be upset about this?"

She was staring, slackjawed. Finally she said weakly, "You've never seemed to like children much."

"I'll like *our* children perfectly well," he said. "And if you were paying attention, you might have realized that I actually like Draco's son, and I don't even mind your other friends' children."

"Oh," Hermione said shakily. "I guess I assumed you were just being polite because you had to."

"Sweetheart, I love you, but your hormones have apparently addled your brain. There hasn't been any particular reason for me to pretend civility toward your friends or anyone else for almost three years not since the Law was repealed and Trelawney sent to Azkaban."

"Well, you might have been being nice for my sake," she sniffed.

"I would do nearly anything for you, love, but in this case, it was unnecessary," he assured her. "Your friends aren't nearly as dunderheaded as they used to be, and I like their children well enough. It's amazing how much less annoying children are when I'm not trying to unobtrusively save them from themselves while placating a maniac bent on destroying them all the time."

She sniffed again and twisted to look him in the eye. "You swear you aren't upset about this?"

"I swear, Hermione, I'm *thrilled* about this." He kissed her. "Now, what say you wipe your eyes and put on a pretty dress and let me take you out to dinner?"

"Really?"

"Yes, really. We're having a *baby* we need to celebrate."

She kissed him. "You're the best husband ever, Severus." She hurried into the bathroom to wash her face.

Severus stayed where he was, savoring the relief and pleasure in knowing that Hermione still loved him, and they were soon going to have a child of their own he began imagining a little girl with bushy hair and black eyes.

He just hoped she got her mother's nose.

Thank the Ministry for its infinite stupidity

Chapter 6 of 6

A seemingly simple question from Severus and Hermione's young daughter on their anniversary sends Severus meandering down memory lane.

A/N: Here's the last bit. Thanks to everyone who has reviewed this story -- I greatly appreciate all of them. I hope you all enjoy whatever holiday you celebrate.

6. Thank the Ministry for its Infinite Stupidity

Present day

Two hours later, Severus and Hermione were cuddling on the sofa in front of the fire, sipping tea and talking quietly. Hermione suddenly smiled mischievously.

"What's that look for?" Severus asked suspiciously.

She said, "There's something I've been meaning to mention before Serena gets home."

"Well, she could be back anytime, so you probably ought to mention it soon," Severus said, smiling slightly.

"All right," Hermione said. Her grin widened and her voice became teasing. "Or, I could just do it like last time – get really quiet and withdrawn until you demand to know what's wrong with me ..."

Severus frowned, then his smile widened as he realized. "You're pregnant?" She nodded, smiling at his obvious delight.

"When?"

"We're due in about seven months."

Just then, Ginny's voice came through the Floo. "Serena's ready to ... wait, who's due in seven months?"

Hermione laughed. "Serena's brother or sister is."

"You're pregnant?" Ginny shrieked. "So am I! Our babies are due at the same time!" She turned and called over her shoulder, "Draco, Hermione's pregnant, too!"

"That's wonderful, love, but could we take Serena home while we exclaim over it?" he asked dryly.

Ginny said, "Oh, right! Sorry! Can we come through?" she asked.

"Of course," Hermione said, just as Serena's voice very distinctly asked, "Uncle Draco, what's preg'ant?"

Ginny came through and stepped out of the way so Draco could follow, carrying Serena. He said, "You should ask your father about that."

Severus groaned. "The last time she asked me what something was, it triggered a walk through ten years worth of memories. Tell her to ask her mother this time, won't you?"

Hermione laughed. "Hey! Most of those memories were good ones, weren't they?"

"Well, yes," Severus admitted, hugging her close. "Though that first bit was a touch rough at times ..."

Serena's voice interrupted. "Mummy, what's preg'ant?"

Hermione sighed. "Come sit on my lap, darling, and I'll tell you all about it while Daddy gets some tea for Uncle Draco and Aunt Ginny."

Severus smirked and did as he was bid. He didn't mind at all. In fact, one of these days, he just might have to thank the Ministry for its infinite stupidity. If not for that, he wouldn't have invoked the life debt and married Hermione.

And as he always told her, marrying her – no matter what he had to do to accomplish it – really was the smartest thing he had ever done.