

Dreams Can Come True... Even Unexpected Dreams

by snapemylove

It is Hermione and Severus' wedding day. Each takes some time to stroll down memory lane to contemplate how they arrived at this day.

Hermione

Chapter 1 of 3

It is Hermione and Severus' wedding day. Each takes some time to stroll down memory lane to contemplate how they arrived at this day.

A/N: Characters may seem slightly OOC, but as we have very little canon basis for Hermione in love and none for Severus, I took a leap of faith.

All characters, places, and other recognizable terms are property of J.K. Rowling and Co. and I make no profit off of this story whatsoever. This is strictly a way to entertain my imagination.

A special thanks to my long-time friend and new beta, Ravine!

Hermione

At 22 years of age, Hermione Granger is doing quite well for herself. She graduated from Hogwarts with superb N.E.W.T. marks. After graduation she received many wonderful job offers from Gringotts, Flourish and Blotts, and the Ministry; ultimately she accepted a position at the Ministry researching new cures for magical injuries. Then this last summer, she applied and was accepted for her dream job: a teaching position at Hogwarts. Hermione is now the Charms professor, filling the position vacated by Professor Flitwick upon his retirement last summer.

More importantly, Hermione and most of those she loves still survive after the devastating Second War. Thankfully, her beloved friend, Harry, succeeded in vanquishing Voldemort on Christmas Eve, just six months ago.

But now it's June. The school term is over, and today is the day she has been dreaming of for so long.

~ * ~

Reclining in a bathtub of lavender scented bubbles, Hermione tries her best to relax. Today is her wedding day. In a few short hours she will be bound forever to the man she loves -- she will be Mrs. Hermione Snape. The mere thought causes a large smile to grace her face and a shudder of giddy excitement to course through her body. Yes, today is the culmination of their unexpected love affair.

Trying once again to calm the excited anxiety she feels, Hermione closes her eyes and allows her thoughts to wander back to how it all began.

~ * ~

In her sixth year at Hogwarts, Hermione developed a rather unexpected schoolgirl crush. She spent her days trying to catch the eye of her best friend, Ron Weasley, but at night it was images of the dark and mysterious Potions master that filled her mind when she closed her eyes, visions of his long black hair, well-defined thin frame with its alluringly fluid movements. But most of all his eyes enthralled her -- those fierce black eyes that stole her breath away and caressed her soul.

Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons were especially unbearable that year. Professor Snape continued to berate the Gryffindors, she and her best friends serving as his favorite targets. She hated his quips about her being an "insufferable know-it-all prat" and his delight in humiliating her. He'd even gone so far that year as to deduct points because he said that she was "ogling" Ron in class. She had to admit, however, that the humiliation would have been much worse if the professor found out it wasn't Ron she was staring at, but him.

Despite the continued small humiliations, she couldn't help but feel excited by simply being in his presence. She exerted an enormous amount of effort that year trying to avoid catching his attention as she studied him, which of course hadn't been completely successful as her loss of house points proved. All year she watched for any sign that he knew of her infatuation, at the same time trying to sense any potential for reciprocation.

Then at the end of the term, Professor Snape did the unthinkable. He killed the Headmaster. Hermione didn't want to believe it, but she couldn't deny it. Harry had witnessed the egregious incident himself. Her heart broke. Her infatuation turned into rage, hurt and a lust for vengeance. It was these feelings that provided the catalyst to spend hours pouring over her Defense Against the Dark Arts books and begging her friends to help her practice dueling to sharpen her skills. Hermione was determined to be ready when the time came for her to release her emotions upon Snape.

Snape sent a written explanation to the Order shortly following Dumbledore's death, detailing the Unbreakable Vow he had taken to protect Draco Malfoy. Snape claimed that Dumbledore had been aware of the vow and its possible outcome, but the letter only further angered the members. Of course no one believed that Dumbledore willingly sacrificed himself to help Snape save Draco. The Weasley twins told Harry, Ron and her about the letter after it was read at an Order of the Phoenix meeting. Like many other members of the Order, the letter only further convinced Hermione that Snape had never truly been on their side.

Hermione fought hard alongside Ron and Harry to be permitted to join the Order immediately upon reaching the age of consent. Now she hoped to find the opportunity for which she had practiced and studied so hard. She wished for nothing more than the chance to exact a measure of revenge upon the man who had knowingly and unknowingly hurt her so badly.

Her childhood crush had provided Hermione with almost endless memories of Snape. She knew his elegant movements, the angles of his body and the blazing fury of his eyes by heart. As the skirmishes and early battles of the Second War continued, Hermione found herself searching the crowds of Death Eaters, trying to recognize some characteristic that would distinguish Snape from the other masked men.

That moment of recognition occurred in her third battle. Hermione tripped and fell, resulting in a fortunate near miss from a killing curse shot at her from behind. As she tried to recover her wand and her footing, a Death Eater quickly advanced from her left. Yet instead of cursing her as she expected, at the last moment he changed the angle of his wand and brought down her previous assailant.

Hermione couldn't believe her own eyes. The masked man then turned his gaze down toward her. She immediately recognized the fiery black eyes visible behind the mask in the fading evening light. "If you want to keep that pretty little head of yours, Miss Granger, I suggest you stay down," drawled the silky voice she had learned to love and loathe over the past seven years.

When he suddenly turned to sneer at another Death Eater that this fight was his alone, Hermione knew that this moment of seeming inattention would probably be her only chance. Locating her wand, she brought her arm up to take aim at her former professor. With a sinking feeling, she realized she wasn't fast enough; Snape had already turned his gaze back to Hermione. "*Petrificus Totalus*," he murmured, and she fell stiff back onto the ground.

She then watched helplessly as Snape turned his gaze toward Harry. "*No, please, not Harry*," she screamed silently. From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Snape's victim fall. It was not Harry, but another Death Eater who had his wand aimed at Harry's back.

Although Hermione witnessed Snape curse members of the Order, the curses appeared to be relatively harmless, meant to incapacitate their victims rather than injure. He employed the Unforgivables exclusively on his fellow Death Eaters. Finally as the battle seemed to end, Snape released the full-body bind and she was able to Apparate back to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Once there, Hermione recounted all she had seen to the others.

Over the following two years, this pattern repeated time and again. At some point during an ensuing battle, Hermione would recognize Snape's blazing eyes shimmering at her from a short distance away. Then under the cover of heated battle, Snape would start sending off curses. Given the fact that he fought almost exclusively non-verbally, it appeared that he was aiming at Order members, but instead each curse ultimately killed a Death Eater.

No Death Eaters seemed to notice these "errors," and the few that might have witnessed them were already dead. But Hermione noticed and other Order members were beginning to see as well. At first the others felt that these deaths may have been accidental mistakes made under the pressures of combat. Eventually, as Death Eaters continued to perish at Snape's hand, too often to be accidental, logic prevailed. Snape was helping them.

He never spoke to Hermione after the first encounter, with the exception of a low murmured, "*Petrificus Totalus*," when the fighting became very intense. Initially, she wasn't sure why he chose to speak this particular curse when he did everything else nonverbally. But over time she thought she understood, at least in part. He wanted her to know what he was doing. Of course he discreetly removed the curse before leaving the battle scene, but why Snape cursed her in the first place and why he wanted her know he was doing it remained a mystery.

His constant protection of her was unnerving. As a sixth-year girl, she would have no doubt relished the thought, picturing him as her knight in shining armor. But she was no longer a young girl; she was a grown witch, a woman. Did he really think she was so inept that she couldn't protect herself in combat? She finally concluded that must be the case. Snape didn't believe her competent.

Without considering why this was so important to her, Hermione vowed to work harder to sharpen her skills and increase her speed. She would prove to him that she was completely capable of handling herself successfully. Although she would never have admitted it even to herself at the time, she desperately sought his approval.

Repeatedly over the next two years, Hermione tried to convince her fellow members to offer Snape reinstatement into the Order of the Phoenix, presenting his actions on the battlefield as justifiable proof that he still worked for their side at heart. When Remus Lupin and Professor McGonagall also confessed to witnessing Snape's helpful behavior, a vote was called. Ultimately, Harry and Ron cast the deciding votes. Snape would be offered his chance to rejoin them as long as he agreed to resume his position as a double agent.

Harry and Ron continued to doubt Snape's loyalties, and both expressed their misgivings to Hermione after the vote. However, they did trust her. "Hermione, you've never led us astray before, and we highly doubt you'd start lying now, particularly to protect a greasy, horrible, bastard of a man like Snape," Harry told her before heading up the stairs of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Harry now lived in the house full time and Ron split his time between Harry's home and the Burrow.

Hermione lay in bed that night, deep in thought and unable to sleep. Her friend's derogatory description of Snape, although not unexpected, hurt. Snape had delighted in making her and her friends miserable as students. Then there was the issue of Dumbledore's death. Witnessing Dumbledore's death only served to immeasurably increase Harry's hatred of Snape. This hatred was then further fueled by Harry's failure to succeed in his revenge attempts upon Snape as the professor fled the Hogwarts grounds following the incident. Harry continued to be Dumbledore's man through and through, even now completely devoted to the Headmaster and his memory. Then there was Ron. Ron was as devoted to Harry as Harry was to Dumbledore and as such also harbored a personal vendetta against Snape. Hermione understood their disdain. She even expected it. She just couldn't understand why it caused her such emotional pain. Logically it made no sense.

Other thoughts also kept her awake. Professor McGonagall had told her she would immediately send out an owl detailing their offer of reinstatement. *Would he accept it? How long would it be before they received his response?* Surely Minerva would let her know as soon as she heard back from Snape. After all, Hermione had purposely found a flat in Hogsmeade after graduation so that she could receive and distribute information quickly. Having played such a pivotal role in the reinstatement offer, she

certainly should be one of the first to hear Snape's response.

Hermione's thoughts then turned to Snape himself. She had not seen him properly since sixth year. Quite suddenly an image of him from one of her schoolgirl fantasies emerged from her memory. She pushed the image out of her mind, only to find it replaced with the image of him dressed in Death Eater robes and mask as she saw him now.

She occasionally caught glimpses of his thin, taut body as his robes billowed out behind him or his long black hair as it slipped out from under his hood. She thought she had seen flecks of silver in it during the last altercation. Then there were his eyes, the fiery ebony orbs that had first inspired fear, and then longing, in her schoolgirl days. Had she just imagined the possessiveness she thought she saw blazing in his eyes when they fell on her during combat? Maybe it was just the frenzy of battle creating that overwhelmed look, she told herself, but Hermione was never quite convinced.

She had to admit that over the past two years, she had come, rather begrudgingly, to respect the man again. She admired the risks he was willing to take for people, many of whom wanted nothing more than to see him dead for his past misdeeds.

One week later she stood in her flat fretting over which robes to wear to Snape's reinstatement ceremony. Silently she scolded herself as she put on her fourth set of robes. *What is wrong with me? I've never been one of those silly, frivolous types who care only about their appearance! I mean really, who am I, Lavender Brown? Severus isn't going to notice the color of my robes anyway. I'll be lucky if he even notices I'm there.* Then she stopped her internal tirade in its tracks. *Severus?* She had never thought of him that way before, not even in her childhood fantasies. Now though, the personal reference seemed somehow fitting. A comfortable warmth washed over her.

Completely forgetting her robe concerns that had seemed so important only moments ago, she sat down at the vanity and absently started fastening her hair up off her shoulders while allowing the meaning of this new feeling to sink in. *Merlin help me, it's happening again!* Once again, she was falling for the mysterious and sometimes sinister Potions master. This time, however, she wasn't sure it was just infatuation.

She pushed all thoughts out of her mind as she placed the last pin in place. *It doesn't matter. He would never return my affections.* Then she promptly Disapparated. Materializing on the corner of Grimmauld Place, she hurried off in the direction of number twelve. She did not want to be late.

The ceremony itself was simple and short. Hermione positioned herself along the far wall, watching as many members shook Severus' hand or nodded in acknowledgement while stating their "welcome backs" after the meeting officially ended. She noted with irritation that Ron and Harry, as well as a few others, headed into the kitchen without acknowledging Severus at all. She also noticed that Severus looked rather uncomfortable with all the attention he was receiving. He seemed to be searching the room for someone or something. *Probably a door*, she thought to herself, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a giggle. However, the unbidden giggle drew Severus' attention at once. She was caught under the penetrating gaze of those beautiful eyes.

Hermione held Severus' gaze as he crossed the room. She searched his eyes for any clue that might reveal his thoughts or emotions, but as usual she found nothing telling behind his perfunctory stern expression.

"I understand this is a result of your doing," he quipped in a whispered, but even tone. It didn't seem possible that he had reached her already, yet there he stood. His closeness caused her to blush. Unwilling to trust herself enough to speak, she simply nodded and looked down as if his boots were suddenly quite fascinating.

Expecting him to stalk off now that he had acknowledged her part in his current situation, she was startled when he took her hand into his own. His touch sent a lightening bolt of sensation sizzling down her spine. Her eyes immediately shot up in hopes of finding some kind of explanation in his expression, but what she saw startled her even more. He was smiling at her. A real smile. A beautiful smile. He squeezed her hands gently and whispered, "Thank you, Hermione." Then he dropped her hands, spun on his heel and quickly strode toward the door.

~ * ~

Hermione sits up in the tub and pours shampoo into the palm of her hand. She giggles as she works it through her hair. She had been so childish back then, so uncertain. His touch and smile had left no doubt in her mind that she wanted him, but it had been twelve more weeks filled with torturous emotional debate before she discovered that she could love him.

Lying back in the tub to rinse her hair, Hermione once again lets her mind wander back in time.

~ * ~

Hermione was having dinner with her parents in celebration of her new position. She had been chosen as Hogwarts' new Charms professor just two days prior. Starting to clear the table after her mother's wonderful meal, she heard the faint popping noise of someone Apparating just outside the window. Similar sounds quickly followed the first.

Severus hadn't even bothered to knock before he burst through the door, terrifying her parents. "Hermione, the others are starting to arrive now, more are on their way. The Dark Lord is sending his congratulations on your new position any minute. Get them out of here!" Hermione quickly obeyed. Charming the nearest candlestick into a Portkey, she sent her parents off to Hogwarts' gates with the knowledge that they would be safe inside the castle.

The ensuing battle was fierce. The Death Eaters were furious to find the Order already arriving. They were absolutely livid upon discovering that Hermione's parents had escaped unharmed prior to their arrival.

As soon as the last Death Eater left her parents' back yard, Hermione Apparated to Hogwarts to check on her parents. The others would stay behind and help the Obliviators round up the frantic Muggle neighbors for memory modification before returning to the castle for further instructions.

After a tearful family reunion and a thorough examination from both parents as well as Madam Pomfrey, Professor McGonagall led Mr. and Mrs. Granger up to her office to discuss the evening's events and protective measures for the immediate future. Harry and Ron, having arrived shortly after her, led Hermione off to the Room of Requirement in hopes of receiving their own report of the events leading up to the confrontation.

Having started her explanation, Hermione was tearfully detailing how Severus had arrived just moments before everyone else to warn them, when the door flew open with a bang. A blur of black emerged from the doorway. Severus quickly closed the gap between them with long, fast strides. Meanwhile Harry and Ron leapt up from the couch and stood protectively on either side of Hermione.

"Hermione, are you okay? Did your parents arrive safely?" His voice sounded abnormally shaken.

"Oh, Severus, thank goodness! I've been so worried. What kept you so long?" Hermione practically ran into his arms sobbing. She felt him stiffen as she flung her arms around his neck, then relax as he wrapped his arms around her; however, he did not answer her question. Then remembering her friends' presence, she understood.

Under any other circumstance, she would have laughed herself silly at Ron and Harry's expressions when she finally turned to face them. Their eyes were wide with horror and both had their mouths hanging open like two frogs trying to catch flies. Harry recovered first. "Hermione!" Ron then quickly jumped in with his own stammering, confused sentiments. "SEVERUS? Hermione... that's SNAPE you're clinging to like a wet shirt!"

"Boys, would you please give us a moment? I'd like a word with Severus," Hermione said, regaining her composure and ignoring her friends' objections. Neither boy showed the slightest inclination of leaving. "Privately," she added somewhat irritably. Again Harry and Ron gaped at her as if she had suddenly gone insane, but after quickly exchanging glances at one another, they reluctantly headed toward the door muttering under their breath.

Once the door closed behind her two best friends, she turned her attention back to Severus. His brow was still furrowed with concern, but a measured look of surprised was now evident as well. She gestured toward the couch her friends had so recently vacated. He sat down. Hermione followed still holding tightly to Severus' hand.

"Severus, I can't thank you enough for the risk you took tonight. Thanks to you, we are all safe and relatively unharmed. My parents are quite shaken, but Professor McGonagall is attempting to explain everything to them now." Hermione watched the relief wash over Severus' face as she spoke. His uncharacteristic emotional displays tugged at her heart, but nothing could have prepared her for the tears she saw slowly starting to creep down his angular cheeks.

With a trembling hand, Severus reached out and tenderly pushed a stray hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. His hand then dipped down to caress Hermione's cheek. "Just seeing you alive and well is thanks enough, Hermione. I never could have forgiven myself..." he started to say, but his voice broke. As sobs overtook them both, she pulled Severus into a tight embrace.

They eventually ran out of tears, but even then Hermione refused to release her grip on Severus. She needed the warmth of his body against her own. She needed his comfort. She needed him. Stroking his hair, she attempted to speak, "Severus?" Her voice sounded hoarse and weak.

Severus seemed hesitant to release her, but pulled away enough to look into her face. "Yes?"

"You never told me what kept you away so long after the fight ended tonight?" His eyes dropped down to stare at the couch cushions. "I had to go back. The Dark Lord wanted an explanation for my lack of success," he answered very quietly. Panic flooded her senses as the room seemed to spin around her, threatening to make her faint.

"He didn't hurt you did he, my love?" *Did I really just call him that out loud?* His eyes shot up startled and questioning. There was a pause before Severus answered. "I've suffered his Cruciatius Curse before, and I'm sure he believed me when he failed to find any contradictory evidence during his internal investigation." The tears she thought were all but spent, started coming again. She couldn't bear the thought of him being tortured on her account.

"Hermione, it's not your fault." She just shook her head, averting her eyes. When she finally dared to look up at him, she saw an optimistic smile gracing his weary face. "I would face that curse daily if it meant I could hear you say those words again."

Her pulse raced. Joyous excitement overrode all mental thought. She leaned in and tenderly brushed her lips to his. A sizzle of electricity shot down Hermione's spine as their lips met. She ran her fingers up into the hair at the nape of Severus' neck pulling him closer as his tongue parted her lips to enter her mouth. He tasted so good, a sweet mixture of honey and cinnamon. She never wanted this to end. But it did end, quite suddenly.

Hermione's eyes flashed open. "Severus, what's wrong?" *Have I miscalculated? Did I do something wrong?* She was thoroughly confused and now hurt by his uncharacteristic and rather startling behavior. His eyes danced with passionate hunger, but the rest of his face exuded a pained look. Severus always had an quick answer for everything, but it was evident that he was struggling to comprise his answer now.

"Hermione, are you sure you know what you are doing? That you really want this? That you want me? What I mean to say ... is ... I do not want to take advantage of you in a vulnerable state." She smiled at his compassionate restraint. "Severus, I have been dreaming of this moment for a very long time. I've never wanted anything more than I want this." The pleasant surprise he displayed at this confession was absolutely endearing. Then without another moment's hesitation, Severus scooped her up onto his lap for another passionate kiss.

Hermione was blissfully floating into sensory overload until she heard the distant sound of the door opening. Extracting her lips from Severus, she turned and saw that the Headmistress now stood in the doorway. It took Professor McGonagall a few minutes to erase the look of astonishment from her face. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger. I should have knocked." She then nodded to Severus. "Professor."

Severus only chuckled in response before gently reminding her that he was no longer any such thing. A new realization hit Hermione. She had never heard Severus laugh before. It was beautiful. The tingling warmth began to wash over her again at the very sound of it.

"Was there something you wanted, Minerva?" Had she just heard amusement in Severus' voice? "Uh ... yes. Hermione, your parents will be staying here tonight. Remus and Tonks have agreed to stay with them for as long as they wish once they return home. You are welcome to stay here at the castle tonight as well, Hermione. I, uh, was going to offer them this room for the night, but if you'd prefer, I could find them other accommodations," the Headmistress managed with some difficulty. "That won't be necessary, Professor. They can of course stay here tonight, as you wish. And thank you, Minerva ... for everything." McGonagall smiled, finally looking composed again. "You are most welcome my dear. I'll get your parents now."

After seeing her parents comfortably moved into the Room of Requirement for the night, Hermione left for her own flat. As she had hoped, Severus insisted on staying with her through the night if she insisted on returning to her own flat instead of staying at the castle "like a sensible woman." She walked to the edge of the school grounds and Disapparated. Severus would be waiting for her.

Once inside the confines of her own bedroom, she gave herself over to him completely. She was prepared this time to see his surprise as she confessed to Severus that this was her first such encounter. She trusted him though, and her trust was quickly reaffirmed by the gentleness he showered upon her. She could easily recognize the cautiousness with which he moved so as not to hurt her, but she delighted in their joining. The feeling of his thin, muscular body bare against her equally bare skin, his tantalizing touch, his aroma, a scent of musk and cinnamon, and finally the feeling of him inside, completing her: they all combined to create an overwhelming sensation of wanton abandon. She relished it completely. Severus was a masterful lover, seeming to sense what it was she liked and didn't like. She could not get enough.

The next morning the two lovers sat down for a long chat and their courtship began in earnest. She was delighted to discover that under the sinister veneer he displayed for the rest of the world, for her, Severus was a true romantic. He made her candlelit dinners and even took her out dancing to Muggle nightclubs in London.

He made her so happy. Hermione desperately wanted to return to him even a portion of the happiness he made her feel. She sought out rare books she knew he would like. She even wrapped herself up in a bow, clothed in nothing but a black negligee, for his birthday.

~ * ~

Hermione can feel the blush rising to her cheeks at that particular memory. Then standing up, she drains the water from the tub, towels dry and begins to dress.

~ * ~

Their new found love was perilous though, and Hermione knew it. It was imperative, at least in the beginning, that their feelings for one another remain secret. If their relationship were to become public, she knew it would mean certain death for Severus. Therefore, they ultimately decided only to tell three people Ron, Harry and Professor McGonagall. After some discussion on the subject, they even asked Ron to act as their Secret Keeper.

Hermione was so proud of how well her friends received their news when she, and unbeknownst to them, Severus, asked Ron and Harry to lunch to make the announcement. She knew all too well that they still harbored a strong dislike and mistrust toward Severus, but they eventually confessed that they couldn't ever remember seeing Hermione look so happy. The boys even shook Severus' hand and wished them both continued happiness before taking their leave that afternoon. The difficulty of her friends' situation was not missed by Hermione, and she loved them both all the more for it.

Sharing their news with Professor McGonagall turned out to be much easier as well as very beneficial. She proved very helpful in providing alibis when others could not locate the newly reinstated Potions professor or the new Charms professor. Now that they were both teachers at Hogwarts, some contact between them would, of course, be expected, but not much. Both of them living in the castle with hundreds of witnesses also made privacy quite hard to come by. It was Professor McGonagall that suggested they use the Room of Requirement for their "meetings" so that neither would ever be seen entering or leaving the other's personal chambers.

Finally after months of secrecy, the day arrived that the entire Wizarding world had hoped would become reality. On Christmas Eve, her beloved friend, Harry, vanquished Voldemort at last. The entire Wizarding community rejoiced, but Hermione felt especially overjoyed. Not only was the war over, but her two best friends and the love of her life were all safe. Never again would Severus have to put his life on the line pretending to be something he was not.

The Minister of Magic himself arrived at Order Headquarters within an hour after the battle, declaring them all war heroes. He even gave Harry and Severus special

commendations for their extraordinary personal sacrifices and accomplishments. Severus would be spared the humiliation of a public trial, having already suffered through a private trial after his reinstatement into the Order. His name and honor were cleared once and for all, and they could finally bring their relationship out of the shadows. Hermione could hardly wait to proudly proclaim to the world that Severus belonged to her.

She started her proclamations of love the very next morning with her parents. Severus had agreed to accompany Hermione to her parents' home for Christmas morning. Yet once again, she was caught unprepared by his unusual behavior when she arrived at the agreed upon Apparition site. His customary fluidity and grace were gone. Instead, he was fidgety, adjusting his clothing every few minutes, and he asked her three different times in the five minutes it took to walk to her parents door if he looked acceptable.

She would never have believed it possible, but to say that Severus appeared nervous was a vast understatement. Standing next to her was a grown man, one of the most powerful wizards she had ever met, an ex-Death Eater, former Order spy, newly declared war hero, and he was scared.

Truth be told, Severus looked amazing in his heavy black traveling cloak and what was most certainly dress robes, minus the tie. His black hair with just the slightest hint of silver looked soft and notably grease-free as it lay loosely over his shoulders. She had never felt more proud to call him hers, and taking his hand into her own, Hermione told him so as she knocked on her parents' door.

The elder Grangers recognized Severus at once as the man who had saved their lives and that of their daughter just months prior. They invited him in, thanking him profusely for his protection. His fidgety nervousness gone, he was nothing short of pure elegance once inside her childhood home. Hermione's heart skipped a beat when their eyes locked across the decorated table. Love and admiration shone clearly in Severus' eyes. She only hoped that he could see the same in her own eyes.

Any fears or concerns her parents may have experienced as a result of Hermione's announcement that she and Severus were a couple, or her explanation of why she had not told them previously, had apparently melted away by the end of their Christmas meal. When Severus and her father retired to the sitting room together after dinner, she silently rejoiced at how well they seemed to be getting along.

So it was in a blissful mood that Hermione arrived just outside number twelve, Grimmauld Place to meet Severus for the Christmas Day celebration party. Professor McGonagall had insisted that they all meet at the Order Headquarters that evening for a much-deserved night of celebrating. Even Severus seemed to be in an exuberant mood as he arrived a few moments later to meet her. After greeting her with an indulgent kiss, they entered the house arm-in-arm.

Knowing that they no longer had to hide their feelings for one another had been a huge relief, but Hermione knew how much her lover cherished his privacy. Therefore, she was almost as surprised as everyone else when Severus did not drop her arm, but rather pulled her closer before entering the party. Having kept the nature of their relationship secret, no one even knew they were a couple let alone expected him to participate in such a tender display. Hermione couldn't help but giggle as the entire assembly, with the exception of three of course, let out a collective gasp of astonishment as they entered the party cuddled together. But when Severus donned a mischievous smirk and pointed to the mistletoe over their heads before loosing a passionate kiss upon her lips, even the three who had been contently smiling a moment ago, displayed looks of pure amazement.

Severus rarely left her side all evening. He wrapped his arm around her waist as they talked with friends and answered the barrage of questions about their newly revealed relationship. He lavished her with tender touches and discreet kisses and then surprised everyone even further when he led her out to dance. His surprises didn't stop there though.

Hermione didn't notice when Severus maneuvered her to the front of the dance floor, but she did notice when he suddenly nodded his head near the end of a song toward Mr. Weasley, who was gleefully manning a Muggle stereo for the evening's musical entertainment. Oh, how the butterflies leapt into her stomach when Mr. Weasley cut the music and asked for everyone's attention. "The floor is yours, Professor," he then said, flashing Severus a broad smile. The butterflies performed a complete loop-de-loop when she saw the amused exuberance that once again danced in his eyes. It was the exact same look she had briefly seen upon his arrival earlier in the evening.

Severus turned toward the crowd before them and cleared his throat. "If you would all grant me a moment of your time, I feel it appropriate that all of you get to act as my witnesses tonight." Having said this he turned back toward Hermione and clasped her hands in his. His voice had a nervous tremble in it when he spoke again, but it was loud enough for all to hear. "Hermione, my love, as our friends here, well, as close to friends as an snarky old git like me could expect to have, are here to witness, I have something to ask you."

Kneeling down on one knee, he released her hands, pulled a small velvet box out of his robes and opened it. "I spoke with your father this morning and received his blessing. Now I ask for yours. Hermione Granger, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" Hermione didn't even try to stop the tears of joy from streaming down her cheeks as she happily accepted his proposal.

A hearty cheer filled the room as Severus slid the ring onto her finger a sparkling clear diamond hugged between two smaller stones, a Gryffindor-red ruby and a Slytherin-green emerald.

~ * ~

Hermione places the last pin into her hair. "And now it's all finally coming true," she whispers to herself as she scrutinizes her reflection in the mirror. She adjusts the white, silver-trimmed velvet robe so that it reveals more of the shimmering sequins and pearls of the dress below. She smiles, remembering how many hours she and her mother had invested into transforming her mother's wedding dress into a modern style for her own wedding.

The sound of footsteps draws her attention away from the mirror to the door where her parents now stand. Her father has tears in his eyes. "You look absolutely breathtaking, Pumpkin." Her mother dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief. "It's time, Hermione. Your husband nervously awaits your arrival."

Severus

Chapter 2 of 3

Severus reminisces through his own memories as he mentally prepares for his wedding.

Professor Severus Snape sits in his favorite wingback chair by the hearth absently shifting his now lukewarm cup of tea in his hands. It would appear from the doorway that Severus is looking at something inside the empty fireplace, but in actuality he is hardly registering his surroundings at all. He is deep in thought, having chosen to skip breakfast this morning in favor of the quiet solitude of his lair. *My lair...*

A smug grin flutters across his face. Yes, this has been his lair for many years, but that is all to change today. In a few hours time, he will be a bound man and his will become theirs. No more will this be his lair. These rooms will be their home, at least during the school term. He can hardly believe it is true. At 42 years of age, he is still quite young by wizarding standards, but he long ago gave up any dreams he once had of love, marriage or a family of his own.

~ * ~

He'd had a girlfriend once while he was a student, but it had never amounted to more than a few hot and heavy snogging sessions. The relationship didn't last long either. As soon as the girl discovered Severus' lack of pureblood breeding, she quickly fled his company.

Shortly after graduation, he joined the ranks of the Dark Lord's minions. Although to be honest, when given the choice between complete submission to the most powerful dark wizard of the age or excruciating torture followed by death, he really hadn't felt he had a choice at all. As a Death Eater, he received many female invitations. While it was true that he accepted a few such invitations, the women rarely stuck around for repeat performances.

Such women didn't want him. They wanted what they thought Severus could offer them -- power and wealth. It was common knowledge within the dark circles that Severus was quickly rising within the Dark Lord's ranks and that the Dark Lord paid his servants well, usually in looted bounty. Those women didn't care at all that his assigned tasks cost him his morality.

Even after receiving a measure of atonement through Dumbledore's trust and accepting the older wizard's job offers, both with the school and the Order of the Phoenix, Severus never allowed himself to hope for a real relationship. What kind of life could he expect to offer a woman? He was always at the beck and call of one of his two masters, the Dark Lord or Dumbledore. Besides, what respectable woman would want to bind herself to a known Death Eater turned spy? So, ultimately, he resigned himself to his self-perceived bad looks and worse fortunes.

~ * ~

Yet here I am on the brink of marriage, Severus thinks, pulling himself momentarily out of his reverie. Without even daring to hope, Severus has found love, in the person of a beautiful young witch with enough passion and intelligence to rival his own. Hermione is his rare jewel, and yet he has no idea how this all came to be. It is this confusion that keeps him wandering through his memories this morning.

~ * ~

Hermione Granger was an unbearable student, an insufferable know-it-all! Her looks didn't help her much, either, with her bushy brown hair and protruding front teeth. To make matters even worse, she was a detestable Gryffindor, although at the time he was hard-pressed to understand why. Gryffindors have always been known for their bravery and courage, but tagging along after Ronald Weasley and the young Potter prat seemed neither brave nor courageous to Severus.

Over the years, though, Severus had to admit, even if only to himself, that Miss Granger did have a few very good qualities. Her intelligence was more than enough to rival that of any Ravenclaw. She also displayed the resourcefulness and cleverness of a Slytherin on more than one occasion. The unauthorized entry and subsequent theft from his personal storeroom to brew a restricted Polyjuice Potion during her second year being one of the more notable examples.

Had the girl been sorted into Slytherin House, Miss Granger probably would have been the professor's pride and joy, although Severus never would have told her so, given the apparent enormity of her ego already. However, as a proud member of Gryffindor's troublesome trio, she was nothing short of a pain in his arse.

By Miss Granger's sixth year, even Severus could not deny that the once plain, if not downright awkward, looking girl was growing into somewhat of a beauty. Add to that the fact that she could best even his star pupil, Draco Malfoy, when she actually concentrated on the task before her, and the resulting combination was enough to increase Severus' dislike of the girl on mere principle. No Gryffindor should be allowed such good looks and outstanding intelligence!

Her lack of concentration in class that year was a source of great personal irritation though. She dared to thwart his position and his subject by lazily staring at the tables in front of her instead of tending to her lessons properly. Given her age and the glazed look in her eye, he was certain that Miss Granger was nursing a crush, no doubt on the red-headed Potter sidekick.

Well, he put a stop to that by loudly announcing in class that Miss Granger would be spending the rest of the term at the front table partnered with Mr. Longbottom. "Oh, and ten points from Gryffindor for Miss Granger's obvious lack of attention." He then turned to look at the young witch squarely with a smug sneer. "If you had spent half as much class time today minding your lesson as you did ogling over Mr. Weasley, perhaps you would have noticed that your notes fell on the floor over five minutes ago!" To his delight, the young Gryffindor blushed a deep Gryffindor-red and for once seemed completely speechless.

As far as the professor was concerned, putting Miss Granger with Mr. Longbottom was worse than any detention he could dream up. Besides with the source of her distraction seated far behind her, perhaps she would be able to keep that dimwitted Longbottom from destroying his classroom. *Honestly, is the boy good in any subject?"*

The punishment was also quite justifiable. Severus was sure that the dimwit's miraculous O.W.L. mark in Potions, and probably several of his other subjects as well, had been a direct result of an enormous amount of study help on Miss Granger's part.

~ * ~

Severus shifts slightly in his chair. The memories of his disdain for the schoolgirl version of his soon-to-be bride made him feel very uncomfortable. They do, however, serve to remind him of how it had come to pass that he had not once thought of Hermione for over a year after Dumbledore's death and Severus' subsequent flight from Hogwarts.

Severus lifts his teacup to his lips only to discover the herbal tea within it is now cold. Tapping his wand to the side of the cup, he murmurs the incantation for a warming spell. Then he absently adds some more cinnamon to mask the flavor the spell always leaves behind before allowing himself to remember the first time he saw Hermione outside of Hogwarts.

~ * ~

He was among the Death Eaters the Dark Lord sent to attack the home of the Auror Nymphadora Tonks. As the members of the Order of the Phoenix began arriving, Severus was astounded to see Gryffindor's Golden Trio, consisting of the Red-Headed Dunderhead, little Miss Know-It-All and the Boy-Who-Lived-Only-To-Irritate, had joined their ranks. *McGonagall must be off her cracker letting mere children join in this kind of confrontation!* But upon closer inspection, he realized that they were no longer mere children.

One good look at Miss Granger proved that fact beyond a shadow of a doubt. The young woman was voluptuous and curvy in all the right places. She also quickly proved to be a competent and fierce combatant, having hit Severus with a stunner shortly following her arrival, although admittedly, he was distracted at the time by her shapely new physique.

Sleep did not come easily for Severus that night. He could hardly believe the thoughts the young witch aroused in him. He had known of her intelligence and talent, but was coming completely unglued after being confronted with her breathtaking beauty and her impassioned combat skills. Miss Granger was a force to be reckoned with.

When his mind suddenly questioned what other activities might unleash the young witch's passion, Severus' tented trousers left no question as to just how enticing Miss Granger had become. Her caramel eyes flashed with unabashed rage, her hair blew wildly with every move she made, and her hips swayed as she confidently hexed her way through enemy ranks. Severus was in for a very uncomfortable night! He dryly mused that this would probably not be the last night of painfully restrained arousal he would be forced to suffer on account of this particular young witch. The thought did nothing to ease Severus' restlessness.

Severus was not surprised when his Dark Mark flared to life a few days after the second battle involving the Golden Trio. Three Death Eaters had been killed by poorly aimed or dodged killing curses. Another Death Eater had been badly hurt from a series of hexes that Miss Granger herself had delivered and at least three more had been captured and handed over to the Ministry. It had been by far the most costly altercation of the war so far.

The former double agent was surprised, however, when the Dark Lord specifically identified Miss Granger, whom he called Potter's Mudblood, as a direct target, along with

Potter of course. *Miss Granger might be Muggle-born, but she has prevailed over every so-called pureblood Death Eater that she has encountered.* Severus seethed with rage, accompanied by the unfamiliar feeling of fear. His mind refused to entertain questions as to why, but Severus was suddenly quite determined that somehow he needed to protect Hermione!

Carefully maneuvering himself close to Hermione at the next battle, Severus kept a close eye on her. Then, just as he sent Bill Weasley's wand flying from his hand, Severus saw the one thing he had feared most. Lucius Malfoy, recently escaped from Azkaban, was heading straight toward Hermione, his wand level with her back. As soon as he heard Lucius start the curse, Severus cast his own hex, tripping Hermione. The green streak of light narrowly missed her as she fell.

Severus quickly marched forward and took up a protective stance just steps away from the fallen witch. In the failing light of dusk, Severus saw Hermione searching the ground for her wand. Hermione was unarmed and Lucius was still coming at her. Severus had no choice. Lucius was too entrenched in the pureblood dogma. Severus turned his wand on his long time ally and watched Lucius drop dead onto the ground.

Looking back down at Hermione, he almost chuckled at the pure disbelief etched across the young witch's beautiful face. By then, however, Hermione had recovered her wand. If he didn't do something fast, he was going to be on the receiving end of another one of the vixen's hexes. He knew it would give him away immediately but hoped the sheer shock of hearing his voice would delay her reaction. In his best Professor Snape sneer, Severus told her to keep her pretty little head down if she wanted to save it.

He no sooner finished speaking when a movement caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. Bellatrix was heading to his aid. Quickly, Severus pointed his wand down at Hermione while scoffing at Bellatrix to find her own fight; this one was his. He then placed Hermione under a full body bind before she hexed him into oblivion. He knew Hermione would despise him even more for hexing her, but it kept her out of harm's way, while still creating the illusion that he had at least gravely injured his target.

Once Hermione was safely out of harm's way, Severus quickly looked around to ensure no one was close enough to have witnessed their exchange. He saw no one close, but he did notice that Bellatrix had in fact moved on to another target, namely Potter. A momentary internal struggle ensued. Severus hated the egotistical prat, the spawn of his childhood nemesis, the adored Golden boy of Gryffindor recklessness. Yet, according to the prophecy, only Potter could defeat the Dark Lord, thus freeing Severus from his servitude. Severus drew up his wand and with a flash of green, Bellatrix fell to the ground. It was with this new hope in mind that Severus continued to covertly aid the Order of the Phoenix under the cover of battle.

Finally, the Death Eaters began to flee the scene. Only then did Severus silently lift his curse from Hermione before Disapparating. Unfortunately, leaving his memories of the young witch on the battlefield proved much harder than actually leaving the witch herself had been.

For the next two years, Hermione was rarely far from Severus' thoughts. He never actually allowed himself to examine the reasons or emotions behind such thoughts. He didn't even realize that he always thought of her as Hermione now rather than Miss Granger, yet images of her filled his dreams and aroused his passions. Severus continued to watch over Hermione at each encounter, but refrained from hexing her again, unless the fighting intensified enough that he could not properly guard her.

Then, late one evening, an owl appeared at his window. He never received owls anymore, except for the one that delivered his *Daily Prophet*. None of his acquaintances sent them due to fear of interception. The Dark Lord had no need for them. He had his mark for communication. Confused, he retrieved the parchment, but the contents of the letter only furthered his confusion. The Order of the Phoenix was offering him reinstatement. *Why? How could this be?*

He immediately penned a reply and sent the bird back to Minerva. His note read simply:

MM,

I request explanation. Please meet me at the werewolf's refuge at 9 o'clock tomorrow evening. If this time is unsuitable, please owl as soon as possible. I will notify you if plans must change.

SS

The following evening Severus arrived at the Shrieking Shack to prepare a room for Minerva's arrival. As requested, the Headmistress arrived promptly at nine and found him seated in one of the two chairs he had transfigured from the broken furniture that laid scattered around the dusty room.

"I don't usually leave the castle at this late hour if I can help it, so I will need to keep this brief, Severus," she stated, seating herself in the chair opposite him. He thanked her for coming and then went straight to the question at hand. "Minerva, I do not want to appear ungrateful, but how is this possible?"

Minerva smiled. "This has been a long time in coming, Severus. One of our members has been chronicling your helpful behavior for two years now. However, to be fair, I feel I must tell you that this was not the first time that the topic has been put to a vote, nor was it unanimous. I am sure that there are some who will not be convinced even if you do agree to come back into the Order." Severus felt a slight sting from her words, but knew she spoke the truth. It had been that way from the very beginning; at least Minerva had the courage to tell him plainly.

"I'm sure I've got some pretty good guesses as to whom you speak," he scoffed, more to himself than to the woman sitting across from him. Nevertheless, Minerva raised her eyebrows in a skeptical look. "You might be surprised. It may interest you to know that the vote passed by a margin of two. The youngest Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter cast the deciding votes."

The blood seemed to drain from Severus' face as this revelation sank in. He did not want to be indebted to those egotistical little gits, but it also meant something else. He no longer needed to ask who would have pushed such an issue into fruition. Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter's contempt for him was equaled only by his contempt for them. There was only one person who could have persuaded the young men to vote in his favor -- Hermione Granger.

Severus cleared his throat. "Based on the information you have provided, I feel I can confidently accept the Order's offer. Knowing that my favor within the Order has remained unchanged only reassures me that the offer is not meant as some sort of trap." Minerva practically choked in indignation. Her voice was stern and reproachful when she spoke again. "Surely, Severus, you know that the Order does not utilize such crude methods of operation."

Severus smirked. "The organization may not Headmistress, but I can assure you, there are those among your ranks who could and would, if given the opportunity. But now, I will detain you no longer. I thank you for your time and your honesty, Minerva."

Minerva softened considerably as he expressed his gratitude, but hesitated to leave. "You are welcome, but before I officially accept your answer, I must clarify. You do understand that you will once again be expected to report to us regarding Lord Voldemort's activities and plans?"

Severus noticed with consternation that Minerva winced at the Dark Lord's name, but just nodded. He understood their expectations.

Later that night, Severus sat in front of a dying fire. Under the numbing effects of copious amounts of firewhisky, he allowed himself to examine his motives for participating in such an agreement again. He now had to inform the Dark Lord of his upcoming reinstatement, and he would have to be each organization's liaison to the other once again. Although Severus deeply regretted having to kill Dumbledore to uphold his vows to Narcissa and Dumbledore, it had at least made his life a little less stressful. It had left him with only one master instead of two. Now, he was right back in the same position as before.

But this time is different, Severus told himself. Knowing that Dumbledore had faith in him had meant a lot to Severus, but discovering that Hermione had faith in him as well ... well, that was beyond anything he had ever dared to hope for. Hermione personified everything Severus admired: intelligence, talent, and power, and yet she maintained her humility and compassion as well. It didn't hurt that she was a woman either. A woman that happened to be very pleasing to the eye. Yes, this was one debt he was most definitely willing to repay.

When the day for his reinstatement ceremony arrived, Severus steeled himself for the inevitable. He hated to be the center of attention and knowing that many of those in attendance sincerely did not want him there only made it worse, but he did attend the ceremony. He stood in front of the assembly and swore his allegiance to the Order

and its members. *Even those that hate me.* He then, begrudgingly, accepted their gestures of welcome. He even politely ignored the rudeness of those who ignored him.

All the while, Severus searched the crowd looking for Hermione. He needed her to know how much he appreciated her efforts. Gratitude was difficult for Severus to communicate. "Please" and "thank you" were not often heard in his childhood nor were they necessary in a Death Eater's way of life, but Hermione had earned his respect and his gratitude. She deserved to hear it, but where was she? Severus was about to give up on all hope of finding her when he heard her unmistakable giggle. It sounded exactly as it had when she was a student at Hogwarts.

Hermione was leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room. She looked more beautiful than ever in bronze colored robes that accentuated her caramel-colored eyes, eyes that appeared to be dancing in the bright lights of the room. Eyes that drew him in and swallowed him into their depths. Eyes full of emotion, although what emotion he was unable to discern at the moment.

Startled, Severus suddenly realized that he had unconsciously crossed the room and was standing directly in front of Hermione. He had to speak. "I understand this is a result of your doing." *No, that sounded all wrong,* his mind instantly cried out. The words sounded cold and ungrateful.

Hermione just nodded and then stared down at the floor. Certain that he had hurt her with his unchecked words, Severus rapidly tried to think of a way to rectify the situation. However, before he could formulate a complete thought, his body once again reacted of its own volition. His arms reached out and took her soft hands into his own. A bolt of pure energy sizzled through him. He watched as Hermione jerked her gaze back to his face, and he could not restrain the resulting smile. Just maybe, she had felt something too.

"Thank you, Hermione," he somehow managed to whisper as another shock of energy raced through him. The urge to lean down and kiss her was almost overwhelming. Yet, reigning in his sensibilities, he simply released her hands and purposefully strode straight for the door. He needed to get away. He needed to think clearly.

By the time he reached the sanctuary of his home, Severus felt like he was floating on air. Hermione was no longer the young girl who had been his student at Hogwarts. She was now a beautiful, talented, mature witch. Although she had looked surprised, and he couldn't really blame her, Hermione had not recoiled from his touch or showed any signs of disgust or revulsion. Quite the contrary, she had even smile back at him, and if he was not mistaken, she had watched him intently as he left.

In the months following his reinstatement, Severus felt happier than he could ever remember feeling before in his entire life. While it was true that he didn't see Hermione much, his fortunes finally appeared to be improving immensely. The Dark Lord had been pleased to hear that he had been welcomed back into the Order, as he no doubt thought it to be a huge advantage to his own war efforts.

Minister Scrimgeour cleared Severus of his murder charge, thanks almost entirely to the testimony of Hermione and Minerva, in a closed session trial. *The Daily Prophet* even printed an article about it. Of course, the article was small and carefully crafted so as to allow Potter to maintain his dignity and public image, but even that didn't bother him as much as usual. At least Hermione would be pleased that he hadn't tarnished her best friend's reputation.

However, that had apparently been the calm before the storm, because one week after Severus' trial, the Dark Lord summoned his minions for an attack that would prove emotionally devastating to Severus. Voldemort announced his plan immediately. "Hogwarts has just brought in a new professor for next year's term, who also just happens to be an extraordinarily powerful Mudblood, a close friend to our young Mr. Potter, and an esteemed member of their Order of the Phoenix: one Miss Granger." The Dark Lord continued that he had just received word that Miss Granger was planning to be at the home of her Muggle parents, unguarded, this very evening. His orders were to kill them all.

Severus was horror-struck. Protecting Hermione during a battle without being detected was hard enough; he had no idea how he could protect her and her defenseless parents from an all out attack. Fortunately, the Dark Lord unknowingly gave him a faint chance. The Dark Lord ordered Snape to lead the mission. He was to go ahead of the group, as a scout, to ensure that Hermione was in fact there alone. Voldemort felt that Hermione might not question Severus' presence, if discovered, thinking that perhaps he was there as an Order-appointed guard. The rest of the attack party would then follow after approximately 15 minutes time. It didn't leave Severus much time, but he had to try. He loved her.

As this sudden realization began to saturate his brain, Severus was spurred into action. *Yes, I do love her, and I am going to protect her or die trying.* Severus Apparated to Hogwarts' gates and sent his Patronus to Minerva. He then sent another toward Hogsmeade for the Weasley twins and Remus before Disapparating for the Granger's home.

Never before had he felt such relief at the sight of a Weasley as he did when the twin redheads appeared almost immediately after Severus, but by then he had limited time. There was no time to relax. He burst into the house shouting a quick explanation and a demand. Hermione needed to get her parents out of the house. Now!

Severus reported back to an irate Dark Lord after the ensuing scuffle. Severus had been in charge of the mission and, therefore, held the responsibility for its failure. Of course that was entirely true; he was responsible for Hermione and her parents' current health and would gratefully confess as much to anyone, except the man standing before him at the moment. Therefore, he lied and the Dark Lord made sure he paid for it, in pain. Yet somehow, he managed to keep his mental defenses intact as Voldemort searched for any sign of betrayal. Finding nothing, the Dark Lord eventually released him.

Only once he was safely outside of the Dark Lord's presence did Severus' panic truly set in. As the lead man of the mission, he had had to lead the Death Eater's retreat as well. A series of horrible possibilities began to fill his mind. What if one of the Death Eater's got in a parting shot after Severus Disapparated? What if the Dark Lord had another party waiting at Hogwarts as back up?

Severus Apparated to Hogwarts' gates for the second time that evening, sprinted across the grounds and through the main entrance. He immediately headed toward the hospital wing, hoping against hope that Hermione would not be there, but also that someone there would know her current whereabouts. Quickly pounding his way along the most direct route, Severus only made it approximately half way when Remus Lupin's voice drew his attention. "Snape? Is that you? What are you doing here?"

Severus snapped around to face Remus who stepped out of a side corridor. "Lupin, has Hermione arrived here?" He knew he sounded exceptionally ill-tempered, but he felt increasingly desperate. He needed to see Hermione, to see for himself that she was unharmed. Remus looked at him suspiciously, but ultimately answered, "She passed me about 15 minutes ago with Harry and Ron, on the seventh floor near that big troll tapestry." Severus immediately turned and started off in the new direction with an abrupt, "Thanks," hissed over his shoulder.

Severus reached the seventh floor in short order. Clearing his mind of all other thoughts, Severus concentrated on Hermione. *I need to see Hermione Granger, I need to see Hermione Granger.* He continued the mental chant until the door appeared. Then he thrust open the door a bit more forcibly than he intended causing it to bang against the stone wall.

Seeing Hermione's wet cheeks and her body trembling with sobs, renewed panic washed over Severus. Nothing else in the room registered his mind as he called out to her. He urgently needed to hear Hermione's reassurance that she and her family were in fact unharmed.

He wasn't sure how he had expected Hermione to react to him storming into the room, but it certainly hadn't included the relief he saw in her face or her flinging herself into his arms. Another sizzle of heat shot through him as Hermione's arms encased his waist causing him to instinctively stiffen. Then his mind latched onto her words. *Did she just call me Severus? She was worried about me?* He allowed himself to relax then, wrapping his arms around the trembling witch, while enjoying the feeling of her warm body pressed against his own. That was until Severus looked over her shoulder.

Standing in front of the couch Hermione had just vacated were Severus' two least favorite former students, wands in hand, although they were obviously shocked by the sight of his and Hermione's embrace. Their mouths hung open in a most undignified manner for several minutes. Unfortunately, both Weasley and Potter recovered their voices as Hermione released her grip on him to return her attention toward her two friends. Their joint objections didn't surprise him in the least, but her request that her friends leave them alone, together, threatened to empty his lungs of air. It further amazed him when the two boys gave in to Hermione's request at the slightest display of irritation on her part.

It was only after the prats were gone that Severus realized Hermione was still holding tightly to his hand. Contemplating the possible implication of this most pleasant discovery, Severus almost missed the fact that Hermione was gesturing for him to sit down. When she sat next to him, her closeness, her lavender aroma and her soft hand in his, all started to overwhelm him. Then Hermione looked at up him with a most tender expression and thanked him. His chest ached with confirmed emotion. He loved this witch in a way he had never allowed himself to love before. Unbidden tears began to well up in his eyes and slowly creep down over his cheeks.

Hermione looked so vulnerable with a stray hair falling in front of her beautiful face, which at the moment was filled with gratitude and concern. He couldn't resist the opportunity that hair presented to touch her again. He reached out to push it aside and tuck it behind her ear. When Hermione's eyes fluttered closed and she tilted her head ever so slightly into his hand, it was all the encouragement Severus needed. He caressed her cheek. "Just seeing you alive and well is thanks enough, Hermione. I could never have forgiven myself..." He wanted to make her understand how he felt about her, but silent sobs suddenly overtook him, choking out all hope of further speech.

At some point, Severus realized that Hermione had encased his shoulders with her arms. Hermione was embracing him, comforting him. This intelligent, beautiful witch, who could no doubt have any wizard she wanted, was holding him, running her fingers through his hair and letting him cry on her shoulder. Normally, Severus would never let anyone see him so vulnerable, but at the moment he wished only that time would stop, allowing Hermione to hold him forever.

Eventually, Severus got his tears back under control. In the new silence, he heard Hermione whisper his name. He noted that her voice held telling signs that she had been crying again as well. He pulled back from her just far enough to look into her face. It was true. Her cheeks were flushed and damp. "Yes?" His reply was no more than a whisper.

"You never told me what kept you so long after the fight ended tonight?" Severus dreaded having to answer that question, but deep down he suspected Hermione would get around to asking it. Memories of the recent torment flooded his mind so fully that he hoped his involuntary answer had been worded correctly.

A reminder of who he really was would no doubt make her flee from him in disgust. Fear engulfed Severus as he saw horror fill her beautiful face. He silently cursed himself for ruining the wonderful moment they had just shared. Instinctively, Severus looked down. He didn't want to watch her as she fled. But Hermione didn't flee. In fact, quite the opposite. She gripped him tighter, pulling him up against her again.

"He didn't hurt you did he my love?" *My love? Did I hear her correctly?* Severus had wanted to hear such words from Hermione for so long. He could barely believe that she had actually said them. No one had ever accused Severus of being a happy man, but at that moment, he felt completely giddy with nervous excitement.

He searched Hermione's face for confirmation that he hadn't just dreamt those two beautiful words. Her expression hadn't changed; she still looked horror-struck. "I've suffered his Cruciatius Curse before, and I'm sure he believed me when he could find no contradictory evidence during his internal investigation." He hoped this would comfort her, but instead of looking relieved, Hermione started crying again.

Damn it Severus! You're scaring her away! "Hermione, it's not your fault", he quickly reassured her with what he hoped was a smile. He had to make her understand. "I would face that curse daily if it meant I could hear you say those words again."

Severus thought his heart would stop when Hermione responded by leaning forward and brushing her lips against his own. *She kissed me!* His heart cried out joyously. *If this is a dream, I don't ever want to wake!*

He felt her fingers in his hair. She tilted her head back, leaning into him as he ran his tongue over her bottom lip requesting entrance. As her lips parted, his tongue explored the unknown terrain of her mouth. She tasted even sweeter than he had imagined.

But as their kiss deepened, a horrible question arose in his mind. *What if this is just a result of guilt or gratitude, or worse, pity?* Severus pulled away sharply. He wanted her now more than ever, but he could never allow himself to accept her pity. He had to know.

"Severus, what's wrong?" He stumbled over the words as he tried to answer, not wanting to hurt her, yet wanting to be understood. "Hermione, are you sure you know what you are doing? That you really want this? That you want me? What I mean to say ... is ... I do not want to take advantage of you in a vulnerable state." Hermione did not even hesitate before answering with an obviously genuine smile. "Severus, I have been dreaming of this moment for a very long time. I've never wanted anything more than I want this."

The sincerity and conviction in her voice erased all his doubts. With a delighted smirk, he scooped her up onto his lap and passionately took possession of her luscious lips. Severus wanted this kiss to last forever, but as soon as the wish was made, Hermione withdrew.

Severus followed Hermione's gaze to locate the source of her distraction. Minerva stood in the doorway, donning a look of utter astonishment. He watched with amusement as Hogwarts' Headmistress apologized to Hermione for entering without permission. She then acknowledged him as well. "Professor." He supposed that Minerva, along with the rest of the wizarding world, had never contemplated the possibility that he and Hermione could ever become linked romantically, but in all the years he had known her, Severus had never seen Minerva McGonagall look so flustered. He couldn't help but chuckle as he acknowledged her blunder. "I know that this has been an extraordinarily difficult evening for you, Minerva, but may I remind you that the title of professor no longer applies to me."

Minerva, however, didn't appear capable of comprehension at the moment. She simply continued to gawk at the couple before her. Severus wrapped his arms around Hermione again, watching Minerva's reaction with increased amusement. He then tried once more to engage the Headmistress in conversation. "Was there something you wanted, Minerva?"

Finally composing herself, Minerva explained the reason for her intrusion. She explained her plan for securing Mr. and Mrs. Granger's safety and then offered an invitation for Hermione to stay at the castle for the night. Once her conversation with Hermione ended, Minerva quickly exited the room, shaking her head.

Staying at Hogwarts for the night under the Order's guard was, of course, the safest, most sensible option, and Severus told Hermione so as soon as Minerva left. Hermione, however, argued that she wanted to return to her own flat. "I insist on accompanying you for the night if you wish to reject sensibility and return to your own flat so soon," he announced firmly. Severus knew that his plan held enormous risk potential. The Dark Lord would immediately know of his ruse should they be discovered together, but now that Hermione was his, at least he hoped she was his, Severus was unwilling to risk the possibility of another attempt on her life if he could help it.

He was extremely relieved when Hermione agreed to the arrangement. She provided him with the information he need to Apparate. Then, he kissed her good-bye and left for the castle gates. Once outside the school's boundaries, Severus Apparated to Hermione's flat to ensure its safety and await her arrival.

Severus expected nothing more than to watch over Hermione that night, but instead it turned out to be a dream come true. Severus had been with a few women over the years, but actual lovemaking was a new experience. Once again he felt a flood of fear threaten to overwhelm him when Hermione confessed that this was her first sexual experience. It was obvious that she trusted him. Hermione offered herself to him as she had to no other man. He wanted this to be a loving and tender act. He did not want to hurt her and therefore felt gratefully relieved to discover that his new-found love filled him with a tenderness he had never known he possessed.

Severus spared no effort in ensuring that their coupling was a pleasurable experience for Hermione. He had not expected, however, to receive so much in return. What Hermione lacked in experience, she made up for in eagerness and true affection. His skin tingled under her caresses. His breath hitched in this throat from the impact of her kisses. His passion ignited at the sight of her revealed body, and when they finally joined together as one, Severus surrendered to her not only in body, but heart and soul as well.

The following morning, Severus sat Hermione down for a long talk. He wanted her to know that he loved her more than he had ever loved anyone in his entire life, but he also needed her to know the harsh realities of their situation. The Dark Lord believed Severus to be on his side. A relationship with her, if discovered, would result in certain death for them both. Such a relationship, if in fact she wanted one, would require an enormous amount of secrecy.

Much to his delight, Hermione adamantly dismissed his offer to walk away from further involvement. Instead, she suggested they tell only those who would eventually suspect anyway: her new boss, Minerva, and her two best friends. Severus felt extremely reluctant to share this news with Potter and Weasley. Given the opportunity, he

felt quite confident, they would happily aid in his demise. Sharing such valuable information with them as this definitely provided just such an opportunity, but he needed to prove his trust in Hermione as well. He ultimately conceded to her wishes and hoped that the two boys would have enough sense to realize that wagging their tongues about this would endanger Hermione as well.

Given the secrecy restraints on their courtship, normal dates, especially within the wizarding communities, were strictly out of the question. Instead, Severus came up with more creative ideas. He made her dinner, complete with candlelight and music. He took her to Muggle restaurants where no one would recognize them. Severus even swallowed his pride and took her out dancing in London to Muggle dance clubs when he discovered how much she enjoyed dancing. He also quickly discovered how much he enjoyed watching Hermione dance. All the same, the couple always made sure that they arrived and left the buildings separately. When calling at one another's homes, they Apparated directly inside.

When Minerva offered Severus a return to his position as Hogwarts' Potions professor, he accepted, hoping it would allow him more time with Hermione. Unfortunately, it only succeeded in creating more barriers than opportunities. They could no longer Apparate due to the castle's fortifications, and he could just imagine the sensation they would create if they were to be seen entering or leaving each other's personal chambers. As the newly reinstated Head of Slytherin House, Severus could easily estimate the number of owls that would be rapidly sent home to relay the news of such a scandal. No, that was a risk they needed to avoid at all costs.

Thankfully, shortly after the start of term, Minerva discreetly suggested to them that the Room of Requirement would make an ideal place for a date. Why they hadn't thought of it before, Severus wasn't sure, but he was grateful to Minerva for reminding them of it. Indeed, the room turned out to be very helpful, especially considering that it could turn itself into almost anything they could dream up. His favorite though was the bedroom it created for Hermione for his birthday.

Hermione asked him to meet her there that evening so she could give him his present privately. Of course, by then the need for secrecy was gone, but Hermione said she wanted to use the room "for old time's sake". Severus entered it that evening to find Hermione atop an enormous bed wearing nothing but some black lace and a big red bow. Severus had never before received such a tantalizing gift, and he immensely enjoyed unwrapping and playing with his "new present".

Their need for secrecy had in fact ended in December. The final battle ensued throughout most of Christmas Eve day until finally, Potter once again, thankfully, refused to die and struck down the Dark Lord. The nightmare was over. The Dark Lord was gone forever.

Late that night, Severus lay in bed replaying the evening's events in his head.

The Minister of Magic himself declared each member of the Order of the Phoenix a war hero. Severus even received special commendation, along with Potter, of course, for his work as a spy. Then Minerva insisted they all have a Christmas Day celebration the next evening with Severus and Harry Potter as the guests of honor. For the first time, Severus looked forward to Christmas. This year he had many reasons to celebrate.

Severus smiled as his thoughts turned to the following day. Tomorrow would be Christmas, and they were finally going to tell Hermione's parents about their relationship. Severus had a plan of his own as well. He looked over at the grey velvet box sitting on the mantle. "Accio ring". The box flew silently across the room, landing gently in his hand. Severus opened the lid to examine the ring for what had to be the twentieth time, at least. He'd had the ring especially designed for Hermione a month earlier, and now he planned to use it.

Dressed in his finest robes, with Hermione's ring in his pocket for encouragement, Severus watched the mantle clock. Ten more minutes. He stole another glance at the mirror. Nervousness replaced the confidence he'd felt the night before. Five more minutes. *What if Hermione's parents don't approve of me? What if they think I'm too old for her? After all, I was one of her professors. Her father might be offended that I am requesting marriage after just finding out about our relationship this morning. One more minute. Bloody Hell! Here goes nothing!*

Hermione ushered Severus through a modest Muggle neighborhood, reassuring him each step of the way. He had never felt so apprehensive. He did allow himself some relief, though, when Hermione's parents recognized him immediately, thanking him for his rescue the previous summer.

He cringed slightly when Hermione introduced him as her "boyfriend". At almost 42 years of age, Severus could hardly be considered a boy. Her parents, however, seemed only slightly surprised with Hermione's announcement and subsequent explanation of how long they had been involved and why they had not told them previously. Finally, the last of his nervous tension melted away. He felt free in the new openness of the situation.

Mr. Granger invited Severus to join him in the sitting room for an after dinner drink once they had finished dessert. A lump leapt into Severus' throat. This was the opportunity he had been hoping for. The women were happily chattering away in the kitchen over a sinkful of dirty dishes. He felt quite confident that there would be no interruptions for quite awhile.

Severus gratefully accepted the brandy his host offered him. *It's no firewhisky, but still, it should help*, he thought dryly before taking a large gulp from the crystal glass. He swallowed hard, attempting to dislodge the lump still lodged in his throat. He took another drink of the brandy and tried to muster the courage required to speak. But before he could, Mr. Granger, who had obviously been watching him closely, cleared his throat.

"Severus, why don't you tell me a little about yourself? Unless I misread our current situation, you are planning to ask me a very important question. I'd like to know a bit more about you before I have to answer it." Severus smiled. The man was very intuitive and to the point. Severus admired that.

"Well sir, where should I begin?" Mr. Granger paused for a moment. Severus watch the man quickly analysis him. "Severus, you are no mere boy. You are probably closer in age to my wife and I. How is it then that you've become involved with our daughter?" The question was not accusatory; in fact, the father's tone and face both appeared quite friendly.

"I will be 42 next month, sir. I was one of Hermione's professors for her first six years at Hogwarts; however, I feel it important to stress that my feelings for her did not arise until I saw her again after her graduation. Our actual relationship did not begin until last summer, the night the Death Eaters attacked your home." Mr. Granger's eyebrows rose in a humored looked, but he made no comment. Instead, he asked another question.

So it went for some time, the father seeking information and Severus providing it. Eventually, Mr. Granger seemed satisfied. "Now, I do believe you had a question for me, Severus?" Severus drew himself up. "Mr. Granger, I love Hermione more than I would ever have thought it possible for me to love anyone. I make no pretense as to deserving such a woman as your daughter, but if she'll have me, I'd like your blessing, sir."

Mr. Granger actually smirked at him before answering. "Begging your pardon, Professor, but I'm sure you are well aware that you weren't exactly Hermione's favorite teacher and my daughter can be very stubborn. Therefore, the way I see it, if the two of you have managed to overcome your previous prejudices concerning one another, then I'm pretty sure that together you'll be able to overcome any obstacles that may be in your future. Welcome to the family, son." Severus exhaled the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Displaying a genuine smile for his new soon-to-be-father-in-law, Severus nodded his head slightly. "Thank you, sir."

Severus arrived at the agreed upon location later that night to meet Hermione for the Order's Christmas Party, ready to put his plan into motion. Hermione knew him well. She knew how he guarded his privacy. No doubt Hermione would wait and follow Severus' lead. But Severus also knew her well. Hermione was a social person. Maybe not social by most girl's standards, but she was definitely much more social than Severus. Tonight, though, he would be everything Hermione could ever hope for.

He made a point of walking Hermione into the party on his arm. He kissed her under the mistletoe and doted over her all evening. Normally, the collection of gathered friends and acquaintances would have irritated him into a fury with their gasps and nosy, intrusive questions, but Hermione looked so happy that for tonight, at least, he could overlook everything else. Severus slipped away for just a moment to set everything with Arthur Weasley before leading Hermione out to dance. Finally, Severus moved her around to the front of the dance floor and gave Arthur the signal.

This was it. The moment of truth had come at last. Severus would have preferred a quiet proposal, but Hermione's friends were all here, and he was anxious to get her formal answer. He could feel his nervousness building as he called for everyone's attention and then looked back down at Hermione. *Please say yes, please say yes*, his mind chanted as he continued to speak. He could barely even hold the box steady in his hand as he asked her the most important question of his life.

Hermione looked more beautiful than ever when she tearfully agreed to make him the happiest wizard alive. He now knew what real love felt like. Hermione gave Severus' life new meaning and renewed hope. She completed him.

The next five months flew by in a frenzy of activity. On top of their already busy teaching schedules, Severus and Hermione spent every spare moment together. They talked about the wedding, their future, even the possibility of a family.

~ * ~

Severus' characteristic Professor Snape sneer graces his face as his finger slides down the silver trim of his white velvet marital robe still hanging in his wardrobe. "Merlin, save Hogwarts when our children arrive." He can only imagine what little spitfires their children will turn out to be.

Reigning in his thoughts, Severus dresses for the ceremony. The white robe appears to glow against his black trousers and vest. "Deserving or not, this rare jewel of a woman has given me her love, and I am going to spend the rest of my life trying to earn it," he tells his reflection as he ties his black tendrils back in a white leather band. Then he steps through the doorway in route for the Great Hall. He has a wedding to attend.

The Wedding

Chapter 3 of 3

The big day has arrived.

At a half hour before noon, Severus stands peeking through the staff door, clenching and unclenching his fists nervously. He watches the arriving guests laughing and visiting amongst the chairs that currently fill the Great Hall. Several members of the Order are present, as well as most of Hermione's friends. *Who would have thought that when I finally get married, no small feat in itself, that the ceremony would be attended by the werewolf and a pair of Potters*, Severus muses with an amused smirk on his face.

~ * ~

Ginny stands in the Entrance Hall awaiting Hermione in beautiful pale green robes that appear to shimmer as the light reflects off the silver embroidery. "Oh, Hermione, you look absolutely beautiful," she exclaims as Hermione descends the stairs to hug her.

"I was going to say the same to you, Mrs. Potter," Hermione teases.

Ginny just smiles appreciatively. "I can't wait to see Professor Snape's reaction when he sees you. You are going to steal his breath away!"

Hermione laughs anxiously. "You think so, Ginny? Ever since we've left my chambers, the butterflies have invaded my stomach again." She gives another nervous laugh as Harry slips through the Great Hall doors.

"Well, they are just about ready to start. I think... Wow!" Harry looks at Hermione in awe. "Hermione, you look great! It's a good thing that Ron and I are both happily married, or Snape would probably have a fight on his hands," he teases before crushing Hermione to him in a brotherly bear hug. "You look beautiful, Hermione. I wish you both the greatest happiness possible," he whispers in her ear before releasing his honorary sister from his arms.

"Thank you, Harry. That means so much coming from you," she replies, then flashes him a beaming smile.

Suddenly, music starts inside the Great Hall. Harry pulls out his wand and waves it at the double doors of the hall. The doors instantly appear transparent.

"Won't they see us?" Mr. Granger asks, gesturing toward the guests.

Hermione laughs. "No, Dad. We can see through the doors, but they appear just as solid as ever from the other side. It's just a charm, an illusion, if you will," she explains.

Minerva has taken up her position at the front of the dais, and the groom is opening the staff door. "Mrs. Granger, it appears time to make our grand entrance," Harry announces with a boyish grin. Then he holds out his arm for her. "May I have this honor, ma'am?"

~ * ~

"Forever a spy, eh, Snape?"

"Always," Severus answers with a sneer before turning to face his godson. "You're late."

Draco laughs heartily. "You're the one getting married. All I need to do is stand there and watch." Severus harrumphs and Draco laughs again. Just then, the music starts.

"See, Severus, I'm just in time."

Without another word, Severus quietly opens the staff door and walks into the Great Hall. He crosses the front of the room, coming to a stop at the corner of the dais, his eyes completely focusing on the double doors at the other end of the hall. In fact, he is so intent on watching the door for Hermione that he completely misses the murmurs that break out at the sight of him in a full-length white robe. Draco, however, enjoys a chuckle at his godfather's expense as he listens to the whispers of the amused and amazed guests.

Finally, the large doors open. Severus watches his new mother-in-law being escorted into the hall on the arm of Mr. Potter. He even takes a moment to enjoy the startled look on the boy's face as he returns Jane's smile with a shy smile of his own. He fidgets impatiently as Mrs. Potter slowly makes her way down the aisle to stand at the opposite corner of the dais. Then, finally, it's her turn, his Hermione.

His breath catches as she glides into the room on her father's arm. His mouth runs dry, and his heart skips a beat as he looks upon his bride. The room's enchanted ceiling is displaying the day's bright noontime sun overhead, and Hermione appears to sparkle as the sunlight reflects off the bodice of her dress and the pins in her hair. The glow of her robe's silver trim only adds to the ethereal appearance. *She is beautiful.*

Even Draco can't help but notice her beauty today. "She looks breathtaking, Severus."

"It's our turn now, Pumpkin. Ready?" Mr. Granger holds his arms out for his daughter.

Hermione takes a deep, cleansing breath, then looks at her father with a bright smile. "I am."

As Hermione and her father arrive at the back row of chairs, Minerva nods to her left. Suddenly, the room seems to fade out of view as Severus steps forward. With his black hair tied back, donning black trousers and vest, and white shirt and robes, he looks every bit like a dark angel. Their eyes meet, and her heart swells under his reverent and loving gaze. *My protector, my angel, my love*

She continues to hold his gaze as he bows to her father and takes her hand. She finally looks away as they turn to face Minerva. They share affectionate squeezes through their joined hands as they individually promise to love, honor, and cherish one another until death takes them from the other. Then they turn once again to face each other as Minerva performs the binding ritual. She is only vaguely aware of his mischievous grin before she hears his whisper.

"Legilimens."

At once she is overwhelmed in a wave of emotion: his pride, nervousness and love. He begins speaking inside her mind. *"I want there to be no doubt as to how I feel about you at this moment. In this way, you can feel my emotions and I, yours."* Outwardly, Severus smiles sheepishly at her, which she happily returns.

"If I'd known this is how it works, I would have suggested this much earlier. This is amazing, Severus. Thank you." Then, she giggles slightly as she feels the effect of her response, a strong surge of relief flooding their connection.

~ * ~

"Legilimens."

Severus immediately feels the tenderness of Hermione's love for him. Her response is completely accepting, much to his great relief. He is so wrapped up in the connection between them, he barely recognizes the ritual in which he is involved.

Suddenly, Minerva speaks their names, gaining both his and Hermione's attention again. Their hands are tightly bound together with the six individual cords they had chosen to symbolize their feelings for one another. "Severus and Hermione Snape, as these cords symbolize today, you are now bound spiritually one to the other. What you have promised here today, no one can put asunder. Now, may I be the first to present Mr. and Mrs. Severus Snape. Severus, you may kiss your bride."

Severus' heart fills with pride as he feels Hermione's happiness grow with each word Minerva speaks. The gathering around them bursts into applause and cheers as he pulls his wife into a passionate kiss. Through their mental connection, he hears her words.

"I love you, my husband, with all my heart."

Finis