

# Strategic Negotiations or Not Wasted on a Weasley

by fizzabella

A Marriage Law Challenge with a twist. Hermione Granger is really a pure-blood witch, and Severus Snape has the unenviable task of choosing between the Insufferable Know-It-All and two other bachelorettes.

## Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 4

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**Chapter One**

**Time:** After the fall of Voldemort

**Place:** Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

**December 25, 1998, the Great Hall, Breakfast.**

Christmas had been especially festive at Hogwarts this year, Hermione Black, *formerly Granger*, reflected. She poured a glass of pumpkin and cranberry juice and downed it in a single gulp while holding her nose. She knew from her research that it was a great source of vitamin C, beta-carotene, and dietary fiber, but that didn't add any appeal to the muddy orange juice with the musty smell. Truthfully, Hermione hated pumpkin juice and could not imagine anyone thinking that adding the tang of cranberry to the basic pumpkin taste would be an improvement. It had simply appeared on the breakfast table at Hogwarts during the first week of December. Hermione could only hope that it was some sort of Yule treat that would vanish from the menu again with the New Year. Other newly offered delights this December *if one could call them delights with a straight face* were peppermint yogurt and chocolate-dipped slices of dried pumpkin. Proof positive, if anyone needed it, that chocolate didn't go with EVERYTHING.

The wizarding world really had a lot to be thankful for this Christmas. The defeat of He-Who-Slithered, back in May, had removed a depressing shadow from the community. It was so handy that Harry had defeated Voldemort at the beginning of the summer, so the Trio could come back and do their seventh year at Hogwarts. Hermione wanted to do well on her NEWTs, so she could get a place at a good wizarding university. The desire to do well to prove that Muggle-borns were as good as purebloods didn't apply any more. The summer just past had brought the revelation that Hugh and Jean Granger, Muggle dentists, were NOT actually Hermione's parents, which had come as a shock. Hermione had needed most of the summer to reconcile herself to her new identity and settle her biological parents' estates.

The Heritage Potion she'd made as part of her Advanced Potions class had revealed her to be the biological daughter of Francesca Parkinson, the product of an affair between Lucius Malfoy's father and Pansy Parkinson's grandmother. Her father had been Romulus Black, the illegitimate brother of Sirius and Regulus. Apparently "pureblood" only referred to bloodlines, not behavior. Hermione herself was legitimate; her parents had been married in France ten months before her birth.

She had to admit she took a bit of wicked delight in attending parties at Malfoy Manor and watching Lucius Malfoy grind his teeth when she addressed him as Uncle Lucius. She giggled when pureblood pride demanded he explain her presence at all parties and family events as her 'taking her rightful place in society. She IS a Malfoy, after all.'

Hermione was drawn away from her musings by the rising noise level in the Great Hall. She could see that some of the teachers and staff were making their way to the staff table for breakfast now; Albus Dumbledore was courteously escorting Minerva McGonagall. The two of them had grown very close since the fall of the Dark Lord. Dumbledore himself had announced his great love for McGonagall. He didn't fear she would be used as a "hostage to fortune" as he so quaintly put it. *He'd obviously been reading Muggle spy-thrillers again.*

McGonagall clearly returned his affection. She could be seen at nearly any hour following him round the castle, wearing an adoring smile instead of her usual stern expression. Privately, Hermione thought she looked like the victim of a badly cast **Imperius** curse, but the two of them certainly seemed happy enough.

Harry and Ron entered the Great Hall and took their usual places at the Gryffindor table, both of them prattling on about Quidditch, which was also quite as usual. Hermione had inherited substantial properties from both her biological mother and father, including a storage vault full of Quidditch equipment. Yes, the brooms in the vault were old, but they were classics of such rarity and exquisite craftsmanship that they were worth an absolute fortune. Hermione's inheritance had included an obscene amount of money, so she had given the contents of the Quidditch vault, sight unseen, to Harry and Ron, making it a Happy Christmas, indeed, for them.

Harry, of course, was the Boy-Who-Lived and did not need a classic broom to have all the girls panting after him. Ron, who'd always felt he was a bit in Harry's shadow, was the darling of the Gryffindor common room now that he was BEST FRIEND of the Boy-Who-Lived AND possessed a *Cloudfire Silver Racer*. Funny how it worked exactly the same way in the Muggle world; young men with fast cars got all the attention. As an added bonus, Ron had been so distracted by the plunder in the broom shed that he had quite forgotten to be in love with Hermione, to her great relief.

Hermione had been delighted to find that her biological father had been of a studious turn of mind and had even kept a journal. She had brought that back to Hogwarts to read. He'd had his doubts about Voldemort all along, she'd read, and had gone to France to avoid taking the Dark Mark like his brother Regulus. That was where he'd met Hermione's mother and where they had been living at the time of their death in a flying carpet crash. No one knew how Hermione had survived the crash nor how she'd wound up as the child of Hugh and Jean Granger. Perusing her father's journal was fun, and Hermione thought it lovely that Romulus had been more serious than Sirius.

*Author's privilege to make BAD puns!*

Thinking about her parents led her to think again of the legacy they'd left her. Besides the Quidditch equipment, she had inherited a townhouse at seven, Grimmauld Place, piles of Galleons, Sickles and Knuts, some jewels and an amazing storage vault full of books. Most of the jewels were set in platinum. She'd found a stunning set of emeralds and pearls, some pretty multi-colored topaz, and a set of lovely blue-violet stones that Lavender Brown told her were tanzanite. They were all too grand for school, but it was nice to have something appropriate to wear to the parties and soirees at Malfoy Manor.

In Hermione's opinion, the real treasure was the books. They were stored in a secondary vault in Gringotts, all carefully wrapped and charmed to resist damp and mold. Some were very old. There were books on every topic imaginable, some that Hermione had never heard of. She grew dizzy when she looked at her book catalogue. Dumbledore allowed her to visit them every weekend, in reverent pilgrimage.

She had gotten her townhouse cleaned and organized by the end of August and now was moving her books to the library there, a precious few at a time. Dumbledore offered her every kind of assistance he could think of, as he coveted a long look at some of the books. Hermione had been adamantly against using the services of house-elves to get her house in order until Dumbledore helped her negotiate a flat fee of two Galleons per day, per elf, in compensation for their time and effort. Dobby would undoubtedly use his Galleons to buy socks, but that was not Hermione's concern.

The Great Hall buzzed with conversation now as the morning Owl post began to arrive. Hermione wasn't expecting anything other than the *Daily Prophet*, but her copy of the wizarding newspaper was accompanied by a thick, cream-colored vellum envelope from the Ministry of Magic. Several other students in the Hall had gotten similar envelopes; some were even being dropped at the Head Table. She noticed Professor Snape had one, and since she didn't recall him ever getting much mail, she left her own envelope on the table to watch him open his.

*I really need to get a life if the thrill of my morning is watching Professor Snape open his mail.*

Snape had become a particular fascination for her since the fall of the Dark Lord and, if she was honest, before that. Really, he was quite attractive now that he got regular meals and wasn't being run ragged spying for Dumbledore, taking his life in his hands every time he attended a dark revel. Hermione had no real idea of what had taken place at meetings of Voldie's inner circle, but rumors of floggings, rape, and mayhem, along with the Dark Lord's reputed fondness for the **Cruciatus** curse, had to have made the revels Not Much Fun.

Severus Snape received the Ministry envelope with dread, having a good idea as to its contents. There had been rumors for months that the Ministry was going to enact a law or laws governing marriage in the wizarding world. The wizarding birth rate was dropping precipitously, and the Ministry had been debating a number of programs to encourage witches and wizards to have more children. Dumbledore had warned the teachers that decisions were pending and the Ministry would be making an announcement soon.

Snape hoped this very formal letter from the Ministry was simply an invitation to another dinner, ball, or press conference, which he could accept with pleasure ~~or~~ not and then forget about.

He looked around the big noisy room and sighed, wishing for a tad bit more privacy. *No such bloody luck for the wicked!* With another sigh, he slit open the envelope with his butter knife and pulled out the parchment enclosure.

~OoO~

By Owl

Department of Magical Vital Statistics

Ministry of Magic

London

To:

Professor Severus Snape

Defense Against the Dark Arts

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade, Scotland

Dear Professor Snape,

As part of the Ministry's on-going effort to increase the magical population of Britain, you are required to participate in a survey to determine your bloodlines. Information received from you will be subject to verification. After verification, you will receive a letter containing information about witches deemed suitable matches for you, based on bloodlines, Arithmantic calculations, OWL and NEWT results (if applicable) and astrological charts, so that you can find a mate, and sire/bear children.

*I think I'll sire them, thank you very much.*

New laws are being ratified by the Wizengamot even as these letters are being delivered and participation is mandatory.

Here, the official Ministry printing stopped, and someone had written the next few lines in a round feminine hand, using bright pink ink:

*I wait with eager heartfelt anticipation for your owl, as I know you're on MY list.*

Dolores Jane Umbridge

Clerk

Department of Magical Vital Statistics.

Snape groaned. The word "heartfelt" was circled by tiny pink and gold hearts.

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 4*

Hermione's List.

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### Chapter Two

~OoO~

Hermione watched with interest as Professor Snape groaned and pounded his head on his empty breakfast plate. She had never seen him do that before, even on days when she suspected he had a hangover. What could the letter have said? Now she was curious. She reached for her own letter and opened it.

By Owl

Department of Magical Vital Statistics

Ministry of Magic

London

To: Hermione Jean Granger Black

Head Girl

Gryffindor House

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade, Scotland

Dear Miss Granger Black,

As part of the Ministry's on-going effort to increase the magical population of Britain, you are required to participate in a survey to determine your bloodlines. Information received from you will be subject to verification. After verification, you will receive a letter containing information about wizards deemed suitable matches for you, based on bloodlines, Arithmantic calculations, OWL and NEWT results (if applicable) and astrological charts so that you can find a mate and sire/bear children.

*That would be quite the trick, me siring children. Do be quiet, Hermione, and read your letter.*

New laws are being ratified by the Wizengamot even as these letters are being delivered, and participation is mandatory.

## Of Special Notice to Hogwarts Students:

The Ministry has the best wishes of every Hogwarts student at heart, *except for you, you sneaky, centaur-loving cow! I hope you rot!* and it is our expectation that every Hogwarts student will recognize the importance of marrying well and having as many children as health and circumstances will permit. We encourage you to look on the *Bloodline Dictated Marriage Act* as a **golden opportunity** to perform a **priceless service** for the wizarding community. We know you will **rise to the occasion** and not allow petty things like personal preferences to interfere with doing your DUTY by your fellow witches and wizards, as well as assorted other magical persons who comprise the magical community.

*It's just too bad for you, little Gryffindor Princess, that you can't have the Prince Charming you want. The Ministry has no intention of wasting your intelligence and magical power on a Weasley.*

Rest assured, Miss Black, the Ministry takes special interest in our rising generation of witches and wizards and will do all within its power to ensure them suitable mates and happy marriages.

*Except for you, you vicious little WITCH! Teach you to trick me into the middle of a centaur herd! Make me look stupid!*

Hermione didn't recognize the handwriting, but she certainly recognized the signature of Hogwarts' former High Inquisitor. She was surprised that the older woman would hold a grudge this long, but then she remembered what she and her fellow-students at Hogwarts had done to Umbridge. *Maybe it's not all that surprising that she is still furious with us. Especially me.*

Dolores Umbridge

Clerk

Department of Vital Magical Statistics

~OoO~

January first, the *Daily Prophet* trumpeted a bold headline:

### New Marriage Law

#### PURE-BLOODS MUST MARRY MUGGLE-BORNS AND HALF-BLOODS!

Ministry predicts 'Baby Boom' for wizarding Britain

In legislation enacted December 31, by a majority of one vote, the new *Bloodline-Dictated Marriage Act* has become law. The law requires British-born witches and wizards who are between the ages of 18 and 50 to submit their bloodlines to the Department of Vital Magical Statistics. In return, such qualified magical persons will be sent a short list of acceptable mates. All betrothals must be approved by the Ministry before any marriages can be performed, and exceptions can only be granted by unanimous vote of the ENTIRE Wizengamot. The new law requires pure-bloods to marry Muggle-borns or half-bloods. All marriages must be contracted within 30 days of receipt of one's list of eligible candidates.

A last minute question as the Wizengamot was leaving their chambers this morning, *some of them had to be carried out, as they were too drunk to walk*, elicited the response that only one individual in wizarding Britain is exempt from the new law. I refer to the Boy-Who-Lived, Mr. Harry Potter himself, *who can marry anyone he chooses, including multiple partners, males, house-elves, or even rabid hippogriffs!* The Wizengamot offers this exemption to Mr. Potter as a gesture of appreciation from a grateful nation.

Rabid Readers will understand that this reporter is absolutely devastated at the unavoidable heart-break this will cause her pure-blood suitors, now that there is no hope for them. However, this reporter will never give up and never surrender in her quest to do right by wizarding society.

This reporter has not received her list yet. Seeing as she is a pure-blood lady of delicate sensitivities, she has great concerns about the identity of her prospective half-blood or Muggle-born Prince Charming.

She is optimistic, though, that somewhere there is a wild, sexy beast charming, warm-hearted, wonderful wizard out there, just waiting for a wonderful witch like this reporter to make all his dreams come true.

*The editor advises Mr. Wonderful not to hold his breath, unless blue is his best color....The Editor*

This reporter will lie on her back and think of England, cast aside her own selfish desires, and truly focus on the really important issue, finding a husband that will make every other witch in Britain pea-green with envy, the GREATER GOOD of the wizarding world.

*Mr. Wonderful better be wealthy, so as to support this reporter in the style to which she would like to become accustomed, especially if this reporter has to ruin her figure and dirty her fingernails taking care of a passel of squalling brats.*

Watch for further coverage on this and other related stories.

...Rita Skeeter, Girl Reporter...

~OoO~

Hermione, being the law-abiding witch that she was, had filled out her survey and sent it back to the Ministry by return owl. The first day back from holidays, while she was sitting at the breakfast table drinking ordinary cranberry juice, an owl swooped down over her place at the table and dropped yet another letter from the Ministry. She set down her glass and hesitantly reached for it, wondering if this was the list of her suitable mates. She couldn't stop a little *frisson* of dread from chasing up and down her spine as she opened the envelope.

By Owl

Department of Magical Vital Statistics

Ministry of Magic

London

Miss Hermione Black

Head Girl

Gryffindor House

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade, Scotland

Dear Miss Black,

Your pedigree chart has been received by the Ministry and validated. As a pure-blood witch, the *Bloodline-Dictated Marriage Act* requires you to marry a half-blood or Muggle-born wizard within 30 days from the receipt of this letter.

Your suitable mates, as determined by blood lines, OWL and NEWT scores, if applicable, Arithmantic probabilities, and astrological chart compatibility are, in descending order:

Severus Snape, Professor, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

*He's smart and he likes to read. Not what I would have chosen for myself but I suppose I could do worse.*

Again, there was a handwritten scrawl crammed in between the printed lines of the letter.

*Professor Snape is a war hero and very unlikely to pick one of his former students to marry, but he IS your best match, curse you! Just a warning, little Gryffindor WITCH...he is MINE! You will be making a powerful enemy if you try to attract him! Not that there is any reason for him to spare you so much as a glance when there are real WOMEN around who could satisfy him.*

Hermione shook her head in amazement at Umbridge's tenacity and long memory.

*I wonder who the real women are.*

Filius Flitwick, Professor, Charms, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

*That's DEFINITELY worse. Professor Sprout would feed me to one of her more vicious plants if I even look at Flitwick!*

Firenze, Professor, Divination, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

*I have to wonder what they were smoking when they came up with this list.*

Enclosed you will find form 2221B, (*Bloodline-Dictated Marriage Act* Prenuptial Agreement,) and form 3331B, (*Bloodline-Dictated Marriage Act* Marriage Certificate.) Form 2221B must be filled out completely by both parties and returned to the Ministry before any nuptial ceremony is entered into. Form 3331B must be filled out at the time of the marriage ceremony, by both parties, the officiator of the ceremony, and two mentally competent witnesses.

*My gosh, you'd think we were Muggle rock stars.*

Your marriage will be ratified upon verification of the consummation of your union.

*Ewww! I REALLY didn't need to know that!*

In closing, please bear in mind that you have thirty (30) days from receipt of this letter to contract and solemnize your marriage. Consequences for failing to do so will result in penalties ranging from 14 days in Azkaban Prison to wand-snapping and banishment to the Muggle world.

With all good wishes for your future happiness,

I remain your obedient servant,

*JUST the REQUIRED signature; don't get any ideas, you impertinent chit!*

Dolores Umbridge

Clerk

Department of Magical Vital Statistics

Looking at the Head Table, Hermione squared her shoulders.

*Now, how do I go about persuading Professor Snape to marry me?*

~OoO~

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 3 of 4*

The usual suspects have now been identified, and some resolution must be sought.

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### Chapter Three

#### Daily Prophet

Girl Reporter Seeks Fiancé.

My Rabid Readers know that I am required to find myself a husband under the terms of the *Bloodline-Dictated Marriage Act*

*It's a lucky thing she's young enough to be covered by it, too. She'd never find a husband otherwise....Editor*

I thought my Rabid Readers would find it amusing to follow along on my search for Mr. Perfect. I received a list of three candidates, just as all the ~~her~~ ordinary witches and wizards in Britain did. Now I have to figure out which of the three is the *best* match for little old me.

I think every young woman dreams of the man she will marry and has hopes for the kind of person he will be. When I think of my own Prince Charming, my requirements are really quite simple. I want him to be handsome, charming, and passionate.

*She had a crush on Fenrir Greyback during the war, said he had a lot of 'animal magnetism'...Editor.*

Wealthy would be nice.

*She'll be happy with any wizard with a steady job at this point....Editor.*

Since I am just a little bit famous myself (ooh!), it would be nice if he were famous too so he can understand the burdens that fame places on one.

*Aren't her fifteen minutes up yet?...Editor.*

I have always been partial to **tall, dark and handsome**, Rabid Readers, and the candidate on my list that comes closest to it is...wait for it...Severus Snape. I didn't study Potions at Hogwarts, so he was never my teacher, but the stories about him are LEGEND.

*She didn't study Potions at Hogwarts because Professor Slughorn kicked her out of class for knocking down a whole shelf of ingredients the first day of class. And because Slughorn was still the Potions instructor, the reader can deduce that Snape wasn't yet teaching at Hogwarts when Skeeter was a student there. This will give the observant reader a clue about her age. As for Snape being **tall, dark, and handsome**... he IS tall, and he certainly has dark hair. But handsome? The man is a war hero, a very brave man whom I admire tremendously, but even he would question what she has been smoking, calling him handsome....Editor.*

He's really very handsome, in a sort of Lord Byron-esque, brooding way. And most gentlemen do prefer blondes. I'll invite him to be my escort for the Memorial Ball at the Ministry. I'm sure he'll be utterly dazzled to be asked, and just think how gorgeous my blonde curls will look against those billowing black robes he wears. (And, *my darlings*, have you seen the shoulders on that guy? A MILE wide! Squeeee!) Delicious! Wish me luck, Rabid Readers! I promise you'll hear all about my *Magical Evening* the second I can set quill to parchment!

*I'm sending her a list of Potioneers who can make Felix Felicis, just in case...Editor.*

...Rita Skeeter, Girl Reporter...

~OoO~

Severus Snape looked down in distaste at the Ministry envelope lying on his plate, then, with a fatalistic sigh, picked it up and opened it. Might as well read the letter at once and see whom the dunderheads at the Ministry thought would be appropriate mates for him.

He skimmed the official Ministry text, muttering "Yada yada yada," under his breath, followed by a moan as he read the names at the bottom of the parchment.

Miss Hermione Jean Black, Head Girl, Seventh-Year student, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

*NOT BLOODY LIKELY. I have no desire to be tied to a frizzy-haired, chattering Know-It-All who is STILL best friends with the bloody Boy Who Lived. I would spend all my time having to cast **Silencio** and get nothing else done.*

Miss Rita Skeeter, Reporter, the Daily Prophet

*Not even if they dipped her in yogurt and covered her in chocolate buttons.*

Miss Dolores Jane Umbridge, Clerk, Department of Magical Vital Statistics

*Oh, Merlin on a Motorcycle! ONE COUGH, just ONE... at the first hem... hem... I would dice her into little tiny bits, cast **Avada Kedavra** on whatever was left, and then turn my wand on myself. It would be cold-blooded murder, to be sure, but the Dementors could not take my soul because I would already be dead!*

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*Who do they think we are, Johnny Depp and Kate Winslet?*

Your marriage will be ratified upon verification of the consummation of your union.

*Did I WANT to know that?*

In closing, please bear in mind that you have thirty (30) days from receipt of this letter to contract and solemnize your marriage. Consequences for failing to do so will result in penalties ranging from 14 days in Azkaban Prison to wand snapping and banishment to the Muggle world.

With all good wishes for your future happiness, I remain,

Your obedient servant,

*Bet she wouldn't say that if I asked her to scrub cauldrons.*

Dolores Jane Umbridge

Clerk

Department of Magical Vital Statistics.

~OoO~

Snape rested his head on his hands. He caught sight of a movement near his elbow and without looking up, he moaned, "Albus, you might as well just kill me now. Look at this list of prospective mates the idiots at the Ministry have dug up for me."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not Albus. Pardon me for interrupting your meal, but your name has been sent me as an acceptable marriage candidate, and I thought we ought to discuss it."

Snape looked up at the sound of Hermione's voice and sighed deeply. Hermione had the impression that he was counting backwards from a thousand. By twos. In Greek. She drew in a deep breath, refusing to allow him to see how nervous she was.

"Miss Granger...no, it's Miss Black now, I had forgotten. Couldn't you have kept your original name till you graduated from school, at least?"

*I can only suppose your name was put on my list as a kind of punishment for being a Death Eater. They couldn't hang enough on me to sentence me to the Dementor's Kiss, so they went for the next-worst thing.*

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest, looking down his (admittedly) long nose at her with a sneer on his lips.

Hermione had developed a talent for reading upside down, and she barely paid attention to his comments. Instead, she was craning her neck to see who his other two candidates were.

"Rita Skeeter and Dolores Umbridge? I daresay, Professor, your matches are worse than mine. I offer you my condolences."

"Eh? Er...thank you for your sympathy, Miss Gra...er, Miss Black."

*Wonder who they chose for her, and who she ticked off at the Ministry to wind up with me on her list.*

"May I be permitted to inquire who the Ministry has chosen for you?"

Hermione dropped into an empty chair next to him and made a face.

"My other choices are Firenze and Professor Flitwick."

*How suitable. She has been described as having a wild 'mane' of hair, after all.*

Before he could stop himself, Snape snickered. Then, as Hermione watched, puzzled, his snicker turned into a strangled cough.

"It seems that someone at the Ministry has it in for you, as well, Miss Gra...rather, Miss Black. Dash it all, girl! It's quite too late for you to be changing your name at this point. Whose dolly did you break at the Ministry?"

She laughed and a wicked glint came into her eyes. "You should see how Mr. Malfoy struggles with it. He looks at me, and I can see that he is thinking *judblood*, and then he remembers and calls me 'Miss Black'. He can't bear to call me by my first name, and he makes horrible faces when he has to say I'm his niece. As for whose dolly I broke... the only person I know at the Ministry besides Arthur and Percy Weasley is ... um... Miss Umbridge."

"She has a rather vindictive nature, Miss G...Black."

*Not to mention you're forty years younger than she, orders of magnitude more intelligent and prettier...whoa, where did THAT come from? It IS true, but when did you start paying attention to how pretty a student was, Snivellus?*

"So it seems, Professor. But whether she is out to get me or not, I still need to marry within thirty days or risk being banned from wizarding Britain. It sounds as if your options are no better than mine, so... I'm ... well... asking for your hand in marriage, Professor Snape, since you would be far better than either of my other candidates."

*What a completely absurd situation...she is asking for MY hand in marriage!*

"This imbecilic law! I take it you have no particular *tendresse* for Firenze or Professor Flitwick?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm very fond of Professor Flitwick. He's a very good teacher. Professor Sprout would have my guts for garters if I proposed to him, though. As for Firenze... no. Just no. It's not that he's a Centaur; it's that he teaches DIVINATION. Ewww."

"Ah, yes, we all know how you feel about Divination."

*The entire staff, make that the entire CASTLE, and possibly all of wizarding Britain, knows how Hermione Granger...dash it all to HADES!...Hermione Black, feels about the mystical art of Divination. Not that I blame her.*

"Miss Gra...rather, Miss Black... I simply can't wrap my mind around the idea of marrying a student. I don't bear you, personally, any ill will." *Don't strike me with lightning; she isn't so much of a Know-It-All now.* "But the idea of being... er... intimate with a student is so off-putting that I don't see how it could work."

*How odd that the idea of being intimate with THIS one of my teachers isn't off-putting at all.*

"Well, Professor, I can't honestly say which set of alternatives is worse...yours or mine. But perhaps I can offer you some arguments in my favor."

Snape looked down his nose at her, and one eyebrow quirked up. "Indeed? The alternatives for you must be distasteful if you're going to all this effort to influence me."

*I have lost my mind. I am trying to persuade him to marry me, when I know he probably hates me and he definitely hates Harry and Ron. Ron's right, I am definitely MENTAL. Think, Hermione, how bad are the alternatives? Oh, wait, the alternatives ARE worse than Snape. You know that, Hermione. Remember? Firenze or Flitwick are the alternatives. Neither of them will do, and that will bring me back to Snape.*

"I'm not looking forward to being fed to a *Venomous Tentacula*, sir, nor do I want to set up house in a stable."

Hermione looked around at the crowded hall and appealed to Professor Snape. "There is something I think you would be interested in seeing, but I'd rather show it to you in some less-public setting."

He snickered and she blushed.

"I didn't mean THAT."

*Oh, by all the gods and goddesses, what does he THINK I am going to do? How did I EVER get myself into this one?*

Hermione glared at him and he snickered again.

*That ought to scare her away. She thinks I am expecting a snog or worse. Face it, Snivellus, if that DOESN'T frighten her, the chit is either insane or a bloody fool.*

"Bring your PROOF to my office, Miss Granger. Dash it all! Miss Black." He got to his feet and watched as she scurried out of the Great Hall.

Then he sighed, swept his robes around himself and swept from the Great Hall.

*It doesn't matter what we do, it's all going to end in tears anyway.*

~OoO~

## Chapter Four

*Chapter 4 of 4*

The unwanted are winnowed out, and Hermione plays her trump card.

**Author's Note:** All the characters you recognize belong to J.K. Rowling, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for uncounted hours of enjoyment. I earn no monetary compensation for this story; my only gain is the enjoyment I bring my readers.

**Italic type is used for unspoken thoughts.**

**Please be on the look-out for a few teensy references to a few of Darling Alan Rickman's other movies. Dobby or Winky might give you a cookie if you spot them.**

**Many thanks to CharmedForce and Sempra, betas extraordinaire:) Without their help, the commas would be askew and I wouldn't have had the courage to post this. They laughed in the right places:)**

### Chapter Four

**Severus Snape's office, Vigilance Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland**

The crisis came upon him in the entrance hall of the castle a few moments later. He was just starting across the hall to the stair that led up to the central tower when the door swung open and two female figures stepped into the castle. They were silhouetted by the bright winter sunlight so he couldn't identify them by sight, but there was no mistaking the voices.

"Hem... hem... I worked with him for nearly a year. He is a very... hem ... private man, and I am sure he would find your career extremely ... hem ... embarrassing."

"Now, now, you don't actually know that. EVERYONE wants their share of fame, and I know my Rabid Readers would just LOVE to know what tortured thoughts go on in his head when he's all alone and lonely up in that cold, remote tower. Think of it... the unsung hero, the tragically misunderstood man who just longs for a little kindness, a little appreciation... *I guess an Order of Merlin, First Class isn't considered appreciation enough, these days.* ... a gentle hand on his, er... fevered brow..." Rita Skeeter could have gone on for hours in the same vein, but Severus hoped she would stop before he lost his breakfast.

Giving both women a formal bow, he continued on his way up the tower stairs, with Rita Skeeter tapping along behind him on her mile-high stiletto heels and Dolores Umbridge waddling after Skeeter as fast as her chubby legs would allow. Last in the odd procession was Hermione Granger, now Hermione Black, carrying a folder marked **Gringotts Wizarding Bank** in gold letters on the front.

Snape moved swiftly, but he had underestimated the eagerness of two of his female followers. Skeeter wedged her foot between the door of his office and its frame as soon as he opened it. She was right in gambling that he would not slam it on her foot. Breaking her foot would make the school liable for her injury, and McGonagall would never let him hear the end of that one, no matter how strong the provocation. While Skeeter was literally getting her foot in the door, Umbridge stood in the doorway, blocking Hermione's entrance into the office. With a jerk of her head, she ordered the girl to go back downstairs. "You're not wanted or needed here, Miss Black. I am entitled to speak for Professor Snape, given that I am almost his fiancée, and anything that concerns him concerns me."

*Wonder if Professor Snape knows about this engagement.*

Coolly, Hermione ducked under Umbridge's arm, replying sweetly, "I was invited. Professor Snape and I have things to discuss."

Umbridge's face flushed, but she gave her trademark cough and asked, "Hem... what could you possibly have to discuss with a MAN like Professor Snape?"

Hermione watched as Umbridge's face changed colour.

*She's turning really red. I wonder if I could actually make her pop a blood vessel.*

"I don't think that's any of your business, Miss Umbridge."

"Of course it's my business, you silly child."

*She is going to respect my authority if it's the last thing I do...stupid, Mudblood cow! No, pure-blood cow! WHATEVER!*

Umbridge was on the point of drawing her wand and hexing the irritating student.

Hermione didn't move, didn't even draw her wand, which infuriated the already angry Umbridge.

Umbridge dropped her arms and moved across the room to Hermione, grabbing her hand and attempting to tug her out of the office.

"Miss Umbridge, you really shouldn't do this. I strongly suggest you take your hand off me, at once!" Hermione's voice took on the warning tone that Ron Weasley and



Harry Potter would have recognized instantly.

*I must not hex Miss Umbridge. I must not hex Miss Umbridge. I must not hex Miss Umbridge. I will warn her ONCE and then I will take drastic measures.*

"Miss Black, I am determined that you shall leave this office AT ONCE, so the adults can conduct their business without your frizzy-haired presence to distract us."

*I warned her. I really did. On her own head be it.*

A wandless, wordless spell scooped Umbridge up and deposited her in the hall. When she tried to turn and come back into the office, a transparent barrier sprang up between her and the doorway. There must have been some sort of muffling component to the whole thing, as well, because Umbridge stood in the hallway banging on the barrier and screaming, but the occupants of the office heard no sound at all. Hermione thought Umbridge looked quite funny standing there with her lips moving, her arms waving, and her face nearly purple in frustration.

"Very nice, Miss Gran...dash it all! I mean Miss Black." Severus had watched the display of wordless, wandless magic with a certain measure of pride. Hadn't Miss Granger *Black, dash it all, Black!* been introduced to the concept of wordless magic in his Defense class her sixth year? The wandless magic she had learned on her own, and more power to her for that.

"That's one. Now for Miss Skeeter." She cast an appraising glance at Rita Skeeter, who was standing by the door trying not to be noticed as she peered into Professor Snape's private quarters.

"Have you something in mind?" Snape directed his question at Hermione.

"Actually...I need a jar, Professor. Like an insect specimen jar."

He raised his eyebrows in puzzlement.

*An insect jar? What can she be planning? I hope she doesn't mean a killing bottle. Even for Rita Skeeter, that's rather extreme.*

"I have a firefly jar, will that do?" He crossed the room to rummage in a cupboard under the bookcase, producing a stout glass jar with a screened lid.

"That's perfect. Watch this."

Hermione took the jar from Professor Snape and walked right up to Rita Skeeter. She put her wand on Skeeter's shoulder and quickly murmured a forced transfiguration spell. A moment later the reporter transformed into her Animagus form, and Hermione captured the resulting beetle in the jar and twisted the lid on tight.

"What have you there, Miss Black?" Snape walked over to her and took hold of Hermione's hand, raising it higher so he could look inside. She saw his eyes light with malice when he recognized the distinct spectacle markings on the beetle in the bottle.

"Professor Snape, allow me to present you to Rita Skeeter in her Animagus form, make that her UNREGISTERED Animagus form."

*Oh, well done! If her true paternity had been revealed, she would have been in Slytherin. Must remember to tell Lucius what his charming niece can do. He is one of the few people I know who is capable of appreciating that fascinating little display of magic.*

"Interesting. You have relieved me of one of my problems, Miss Black, and I do thank you. I am sure the Ministry would not require me to marry someone not in compliance with wizarding law. "

She inclined her head graciously.

"You're quite welcome, Professor. I suggest that you do something about Miss Umbridge, though. My spells won't last forever."

"Ah, quite right."

Snape went over to the still open doorway, and dispelled the **Impedimenta** hex that Hermione had cast. Before Umbridge could do anything more than squeal indignantly, though, he cast his own **Incarcerous** spell, followed quickly by **Mobilicorpus**. Snape took hold of one of the ropes and pulled. Ponderously, like an oversized balloon, Dolores Umbridge floated through Snape's office. He stopped her when he got her near the fireplace and held out his hand to Hermione.

"The bug jar, please, Miss Black?"

She handed it to him, and he neatly tucked it into the crook of Umbridge's elbow. Then, he summoned a self-inking quill, a Muggle safety pin, and a piece of parchment, scrawled a note, and pinned it to the ruffle of Umbridge's poisonously pink sweater.

"There. Miss Umbridge can deliver that for us. I'm sure she will be delighted to be of service."

A wave of his wand and Umbridge floated into the fireplace, while Snape threw in a handful of Floo power after her and called out "Minister Shacklebolt's Office, Ministry of Magic, London." She disappeared in a flash, and Snape stepped back from his fireplace while brushing the Floo powder off his hands.

He turned back to Hermione.

"I believe we have things to discuss, Miss Black?"

"Yes, we do."

In a courtly display of Slytherin manners, Snape pulled out a chair at his desk for Hermione and gestured for her to sit down. Then he sat down opposite her, leaned back and crossed his arms on his chest. She had his undivided attention and it was just a tad bit unnerving. But Hermione HAD been sorted into Gryffindor, when all was said and done. She drew in a deep breath.

"You saw that I have become a capable witch in the last year, Professor?"

"Yes, indeed, you have demonstrated a talent for both wordless and wandless magic. I must reluctantly admit I am impressed. Ten points to Gryffindor. "

*He gave me POINTS!*

Hermione was almost giddy with delight.

"I don't believe my bloodlines matter to you any more than yours matter to me?"

"That is quite true. Bloodlines seem to matter only to the Ministry."

She smiled a little in relief. One hurdle behind her.

"Please close your eyes for a moment, Professor."

"Why?"

"I wish to surprise you."

"Miss Black... I loathe surprises." He looked at her with a jaded eye, and she chuckled. "Oh, very well."

She hesitated, as if on the verge of speaking, then shook her head.

"Miss Black, is something wrong?"

"No." She smiled a little sheepishly, he thought, and then she looked up at him, her lips curving in the confident smile of a woman who knows what she wants and exactly how to get it.

"Please remember, Professor Snape, that desperate times beget desperate measures. And things are not always exactly as they seem."

His eyebrows knit together in confusion. The first thing a spy learned was that things were never exactly as they seemed. He wasn't sure whether their situation qualified as desperate, but it had been Hermione's choice of words. Perhaps time would reveal what she found desperate about their, or her own, plight.

"This is something no one knows about me," she explained, then closed her own eyes and passed her hand over her face and then over the front of her body. His eyes widened in surprise as the glamour charm she wore rippled then slowly faded away.

"I cast a glamour on myself to maintain my appearance more or less as my friends are accustomed to seeing me. This is the real me."

"Who are you, and what have you done with Hermione Granger?" he whispered weakly. The woman he saw before him now was so beautiful that she stole his breath away. Her hair, the color of honey in sunlight, was down to her waist and smoothly wavy; her figure boasted beautiful curves that even her school robes couldn't hide. Her cheekbones were subtly more well-defined, her lips a pouty rose-red. Only her eyes remained the same as before; they were the colour of the best dark chocolate, sparkling with intelligence and good humour.

*This is unreal. She can't possibly want to marry me, when she could have any wizard she wanted. Ah, but Snivellus, old son, she can't have ANY wizard she wants. She has to marry a half-blood or Muggle-born. This can't be happening... She can't have Weasley under this new law, but she could marry Potter...*

He forced himself to speak in a neutral tone of voice, but felt his head starting to spin. She had seen the sudden spark of desire in his eyes as the glamour faded away. He was doomed and they both knew it.

"Impressive, Miss Black, but... appearance should be the least concern of a mature witch or wizard in evaluating a potential mate." It was a weak argument and he knew it.

"As it happens, I agree with you. But you deserved to see the real me." She passed her hand back over her face, and her appearance returned to what he thought of as normal.

"Do you have any more arguments to persuade me, Miss Black?"

*By Merlin's Holy Hippogriff, I hope she doesn't, I don't know how much more of this I can take. Any more of this, and I shall be following her around, begging to carry her books...or worse, chasing around the school after her with my tongue hanging out.*

She smiled and got to her feet, placing the **Gringotts** portfolio on the desk before him.

"Perhaps you would like to peruse this list. It's the catalogue of books in my vault at Gringotts."

He turned pale as he turned the pages of the portfolio and Hermione saw his long fingers trembling as he traced them down the page, reading the list of her books.

*Doomed. I'm doomed. A beautiful, wealthy witch with a vault full of rare books? The brightest witch of her class? Sparkling conversation by day, and by night... let's say, no need to speak at all? Things like this don't happen to me, I have fallen into someone else's destiny by mistake. Potter's perhaps?*

She smiled as his lips pursed in a silent whistle of astonishment.

*Good Gods, she IS really serious. I should have known she would strike in my area of greatest weakness. I'm quite sure Firenze can't read; the books would be wasted on him. And Filius would turn them into hedgehogs in a fit of absent-mindedness, or let his students use them for practicing **Wingardium Leviosa**. Mine is a bitter burden, but don't I have a sacred OBLIGATION to see that her assets are properly conserved?*

"We'd have to arrange for joint custody of the books as part of our pre-nuptial agreement, Miss Black, should I accept your proposal."

*Gotcha!*

Hermione allowed herself a restrained smile and nodded her head. "I am willing to negotiate that."

*Dash it all! Am I really going to give in this easily? What can I do to gain the upper hand here? They'll boot me out of Slytherin house if this is the end of the negotiations. On the other hand, if I marry her, it will connect her to Slytherin through me. All those years wasted in Gryffindor. I'll be the hero for bringing her back to her real home, and at least her many assets won't be wasted on a Weasley.*

"While I agree that your books are impressive, Miss Black... and you are an extremely competent witch... those are hardly grounds for a marriage that is destined to last a century or more."

*Snivellus, SHUT UP before she decides she doesn't want you after all.*

"I'm so glad you said that, Professor. I also don't think those are sufficient grounds to marry. But..."

With a strangely predatory smile, she leaned down, placing her hands on the arms of his chair, effectively trapping him. Her voice dropped to a husky purr as she leaned closer, her lips only a breath away from his.

*Good Gods, am I awake? Is this happening? I am being seduced by a beautiful, wealthy GRYFFINDOR witch? If I could get my hands free, I could pinch myself to see if I am really awake. On the other hand, if this IS only a dream, who in their right mind would want to wake up?*

"Dear Professor Snape...what would you say if I told you that I have been having the most interesting dreams about you since... oh, the end of my fifth year? I wonder what you would say if I told you that it's Percy Weasley who told me about that supid bint, Umbridge, who was bragging that she had seen your name on my list and removed it? And that I bribed Percy Weasley to put it back? I truly believe we'll find plenty to... talk about for the next hundred years, don't you?"

He felt her fingers trail over his cheek in a soft caress that left delightful shivers in its wake.

"Oh, and may I call you Severus?"

*Call me anything you like, as long as you keep touching me...*

She closed the distance between them, and he could feel her breath on his cheek, just before the softest of kisses feathered over his mouth.

*Oh, Gods, what is she going to do n... mphm.... hmmm... mmmmmm... If this is a dream, I do not want to wake up...*

~OoO~

The Daily Prophet Society Section

Engagements: Professor Severus Snape, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Miss Hermione Black, of Gryffindor House, Hogwarts, have announced their engagement. Miss Black will take Professor Snape's last name. The couple plan to be married from Hogwarts and will make their home in London outside of the school year.

*Do....es... ANyoNe realizzzee HOW BLOODY HARD iT Is to type when you're a stu PID BEETLE?!*

~Finite Incantatem~

~OoO~