

The Best Laid Schemes

by StormySkize

Variety Challenge Winner... The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

One

Chapter 1 of 13

Variety Challenge Winner... The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter One

Severus Snape scowled as he unfolded his just-delivered copy of the *Daily Prophet* and read the headline emblazoned across the front page:

'MARRIAGE AND BABY LAW' PASSES!

Inclusion of controversial 'escape clause' sways Wizengamot toward passage.

"This is the only way to save wizardkind from extinction," the Minister for Magic insisted in an exclusive interview with this reporter.

By Rita Skeeter

Snape grimaced in distaste and tossed the paper aside. "What rot," he snapped as he moved from his small, neat parlour into his small, neat kitchen and began preparing his breakfast.

He'd barely got his toast buttered before his curiosity overcame his antipathy. He retrieved the paper and unfolded it once again.

The headline hadn't changed, nor had the picture of Arthur Weasley standing before the Wizengamot gesticulating wildly.

Apparently, the irony of a man with seven children and ten grandchildren expounding passionately about the 'extinction of wizardkind' was completely lost on that august body. Snape wondered bitterly if that was because most of them were so old that the newly passed law would have no effect on them anyway. It had been his experience that most people found it easy to impose rules and restrictions on others when there was no possibility that those self-same rules and restrictions would be applied to themselves.

He had been closely following the debate about the Conjugal Required Accelerated Procreation Statute more commonly referred to as the Marriage and Baby Law. He'd even gone so far as to express his opposition to it when the *Prophet* had published a poll a few weeks before. The results of the poll had never been released, and Snape suspected it was because the overwhelming majority of the wizarding world was just as appalled as he was at the prospect of the Ministry forcing upon its citizenry decisions that should remain private.

As for the 'escape clause', well, that was a joke. Basically it stated that witches or wizards who didn't marry and begin having children immediately would be required to surrender their wands and have their magic bound until they were sixty years old and no longer subject to the statute. The Wizengamot could salve its collective consciences by blathering on about giving people a choice, but if ever there had been an example of being between a rock and a hard place, this was it. Snape didn't believe there were any magical folk, he included, who would willingly give up their magic in order to be exempted from the new law.

Snape skimmed the 'highlights' of the new law, which the *Prophet* had considerably listed:

All unmarried witches and wizards of any blood status between the ages of twenty and sixty are subject to the Conjugal Required Accelerated Procreation (C.R.A.P.) Statute.

"Crap, indeed," Snape muttered.

All subject witches and wizards are required to register with the Ministry of Magic. Registration forms will be delivered by the Ministry and must be returned within fourteen days.

All registered witches and wizards are required to submit to a physical examination to be conducted at St. Mungo's by a Ministry appointed Healer, who will affirm their fertility. Said examination will be arranged by the Ministry at a time convenient to both the witch or wizard and the Healer, but not later than thirty days after registration.

Snape continued his vitriolic monologue as he read. "Oh, joy. I get to wank off in front of some decrepit old man who probably hasn't had a hard on in forty years."

A list of all fertile witches and wizards will be made public in order to facilitate the selection process. All fertile witches and wizards are required to file a Declaration of Betrothal no later than sixty days after the list is published.

If an acceptable betrothal cannot be arranged, the Ministry will make an appropriate selection for the witch or wizard and file the Declaration of Betrothal on the couple's behalf.

"And the money the wealthy pure-bloods will pay to make sure their ne'er-do-well sons and ugly daughters have first choice won't have any bearing, will it? Bloody hypocrites."

Any witch or wizard may choose to exercise her or his Right of Exemption at any time during the process. Wands will be held at the Ministry and may be reclaimed when the Exemption expires.

All marriages must take place within sixty days after the filing of the Declaration of Betrothal.

All marriages must be consummated within seven days, and the marriage act must take place at least once a week until a pregnancy is confirmed. More frequent sexual activity is at the discretion of the couple.

The use of any potions or charms to prevent pregnancy is strictly prohibited.

Since only witches and wizards whose fertility has been affirmed will be allowed to marry, it is expected that pregnancy will occur within a reasonable amount of time. Because the primary goal of the C.R.A.P. Statute is an increase in the number of healthy, magical children, the marriage may be dissolved, at the request of either party, any time after the birth of four healthy, magical children.

"Breeding stock ... they're turning us into breeding stock."

If, however, after five years, the marriage has not produced at least two healthy, magical children, the Ministry will dissolve the marriage and arrange for the witch and wizard to be paired with other suitable partners, provided the witch or wizard from the first marriage still falls within the original guidelines of the C.R.A.P. Statute.

"'Healthy, magical children', indeed. Will we drown any Squibs who may be produced, or will we merely abandon them in the woods to be raised by wolves?"

Snape couldn't read any more. With an oath, he flung the paper into the fireplace and used his wand to set it ablaze.

As satisfying as it was to watch the offending rag burn, he knew that his actions wouldn't change the facts.

After the initial, not-unexpected, rise in birth rates in the six to twelve months after the end of the war, there had been a gradual, but persistent, decline in the number of babies being born. While that was a cause for concern, it hardly merited the kind of drastic action the new law mandated. Wizardkind was certainly not on the brink of extinction as Arthur Weasley and the Wizengamot seemed to believe. And as far as he could see, the charms and potions work that Filius Flitwick, Hermione Granger, and he were doing to reverse the current trends had not even been considered when the new law was being debated. In point of fact, it seemed that the closer they got to finding a solution—a solution that didn't involve Ministry arranged marriages—the more effort was put into pushing through the law that would compel those marriages.

The effects the asinine new law would have on the wizarding world in general were alarming, but Snape was honest enough with himself to admit that he was far more concerned with how the law would affect him personally. As an unmarried, half-blood wizard of forty-nine, he fell well within the parameters of the new statute. He would be compelled to comply with it, asinine or not.

But damn the wizarding world for its anachronistic attitude toward marriage and pregnancy! It didn't much matter who you were bedding, or even when. Few couples waited until after marriage to engage in sexual activity, and marital fidelity was an issue decided between couples. No stigma attached to affairs so long as both partners agreed to this open sort of relationship. It was all very modern and forward-thinking.

When it came to pregnancy, however, things were different. Readily available potions and easily learned charms made unplanned pregnancies virtually unheard of in the wizarding world. On the rare occasion that a witch did find herself pregnant outside of marriage, another simple spell determined paternity, and a suitable marriage was soon arranged, either with the unborn child's father or an agreeable surrogate.

Over the last ten years, however, it had hardly been necessary to try to prevent pregnancy. Rather the opposite was true. Spells and potions to increase fertility were in great demand, but it seemed they made little difference. The birth rate continued to fall, and there was a larger-than-usual percentage of Squibs being born as well.

Even as cynical as he was, Snape acknowledged that witches and wizards who were able to should be encouraged to produce as many children as possible as quickly as possible. He didn't believe, however, that marriage should be a requirement. He had absolutely no desire to marry. He neither needed nor wanted a wife. He appreciated his solitude. He enjoyed a simple, well-ordered life and didn't relish having that order disturbed by a wife. He had even less desire to have children living underfoot. Crying babies with empty bellies and full nappies rapidly grew into screeching toddlers with dirty hands and snotty noses, who in turn developed into cheeky teenagers with raging hormones and an appalling lack of common sense. He'd had quite enough of that, thank you very much. Experiencing it second-hand had been bad enough; having to be an active participant would be more than he, as a decorated war hero, should have to tolerate. He sincerely wished that the process of artificial insemination was as well-known and accepted in the wizarding world as it was in the Muggle. He rubbed the faded remnants of his Dark Mark and then the scar on his neck. He hadn't allowed anyone to get close to him, physically, in years, and didn't look forward to it now. He would willingly contribute to the financial support of a child or two provided someone else raised them. But as the new law didn't have an option for absentee parenthood, and the 'escape clause' alternative of eleven years without magic was simply unthinkable, he would be required to marry and produce children the old-fashioned way.

He shuddered at the thought and wondered ruefully how long the Ministry would search for him if he immigrated to Australia or even, heaven forbid, the United States.

Before he could decide whether he was contemplating a workable escape plan or indulging in a fanciful daydream, his Floo activated.

"Severus!"

Snape rolled his eyes. Just what he needed Hermione Granger coming to gloat over his predicament.

A moment later, she was stepping out of his fireplace and onto his hearth rug, scattering ash and soot in all directions as she shook out her hair and brushed off her jeans and jumper.

"Have you heard?" she asked by way of greeting.

"I didn't invite you to step through," Snape said as he glared at her. "And you're making a mess."

"Floos are dirty and messy and more trouble than they're worth, but since you won't allow me to Apparate within a kilometre of your doorstep, I've little choice. If you didn't want me to come through, you should have shut down your Floo. And you didn't answer my question have you heard?"

"Since you've been coming here to work for the last five years, you know that I don't allow *anyone* to Apparate within a kilometre of my doorstep. And, of course, I've heard. You must be very proud of yourself."

"What?"

"You've been telling the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and the Healers at St. Mungo's for years that there's a problem they've finally taken you seriously. I'm surprised they didn't call the new legislation the Granger Solution!"

Hermione glared back and put her hands on her hips. "Are you implying that this *is* my fault?"

"Who wrote all those articles about falling birth rates? Who came up with the theory of toxic magic affecting fertility? Who suggested that there would be fewer Squibs born if there were a 'better mix of genetic material between pure-bloods, half-bloods, and Muggle-borns'?" By the end of his diatribe, he was nearly shouting, his usually pale face high with colour.

"Me, me, and me!" Hermione shouted back. "But I didn't create the bloody problem I only correlated the data and reported the facts. And I certainly didn't encourage the Ministry to enact this ridiculous law."

"I have no prospects for marriage!" Snape was shouting now. "The bloody *Ministry* will be choosing my blushing bride! I'll be forced to marry some insipid, spoiled, self-indulgent pure-blooded witch who will cringe at the thought of my embrace." His hand absently touched his arm and then his neck. "And then, after she surrenders to the inevitable, she will give birth to children who will be as insipid and self-indulgent as she is, and who will apologize to their friends for their unfortunate paternity. My life will no longer be my own. I will be nagged and shrieked at by some fish-wife, or worse, bored senseless while surrounded by a bunch of useless, brainless *dunderheads*!"

"Oh, shut up, Severus," Hermione shot back. "Do you think you're the only one who'll be paired up with some useless, brainless pure-blood? I'll probably end up with Vincent Crabbe or Gregory Goyle! Isn't it funny that neither of them has been able to snag a wife in spite of their pure-blood status and family money? Do you think Gregory will allow me to pursue my career? Will Vincent care about my work or my research? Can you imagine the scintillating and intelligent conversations I'll be having with either of them? And, in case it's escaped your notice, it will be your *wife* giving birth to your children, and it will be *me* giving birth to mine! You won't suffer from morning sickness, stretch marks, or labour pains! And you'll at least get to enjoy the act of getting your wife pregnant! Do you think either Crabbe or Goyle will be concerned about my satisfaction? Do you think either of them will even be *gentle*?"

Snape watched as Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath, struggling for control. She was right. He hadn't stopped to think about how the new law would affect anyone but himself. He had no doubt that the Ministry would, indeed, pair her up with either Crabbe or Goyle, or someone of similar ilk. She was one of the brightest witches he'd ever known, and she was a Muggle-born. The Ministry would turn her own theory against her to force her to marry some stupid, clumsy, pure-blooded oaf. Crabbe and Goyle were just two of the many who would see her as nothing more than a *vessel*. They would never recognise her true potential and certainly never allow her to achieve it.

His anger deserted him as he realised he'd been aiming it at the wrong target. He decided that Arthur Weasley had better stay out of his way, however.

"How long before you and Filius will be ready to test the new charms?" he asked in a much softer tone.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not sure. The theories seem correct, but when we actually try to cast the charms, we fail. The potions?"

"I'm having the same problem. The preliminary work seems promising, but when I brew, the potions are, at best, ineffective. I certainly won't have a viable potion by the time this abomination of a law goes into effect. When will that be, by the way? I must confess I didn't finish the article before I lost my temper and incinerated the paper."

"Severus Snape lost his temper? I can hardly credit that."

"Is that the best you can come up with, Hermione? I'm disappointed," Snape replied, and Hermione smiled, just as he'd intended. "When does the law go into effect?"

"It already has. The registration forms will probably arrive today."

"Not wasting any time, are they?" Snape muttered. His hand again fluttered over his arm and then his neck.

"According to them, too much time has already been wasted," she replied.

"Based on the time table the Ministry has laid out, we'll have a bit less than six months before we actually have to marry someone, correct?"

"Just about. We'll have fourteen days to return the forms, and then there's the fertility examination, the publishing of the lists, and the filing of the betrothal forms. Six months is the absolute maximum if we stretch everything out as much as possible. We'll have to work even harder to perfect the charms and potions by then. If we have a real, viable alternative to propose, the Ministry ..."

"The Ministry? For all intents and purposes, Arthur Weasley *is* the Ministry. He has ten grandchildren; what's his rush?" Snape asked with a sneer.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. He hasn't deigned to speak with me in nearly a year. Not since I rebuffed Ron's latest effort to get back together with me after his third divorce in six years."

"Couldn't you have contacted him through Potter?"

Hermione shook her head. "Harry and Ginny were both ... upset ... that I wouldn't give Ron another chance. I've barely spoken to either of them in months. What about you? Couldn't you talk to Arthur?"

"I've tried. He's been very busy, or so his aide tells me repeatedly. He's taken his home off the Floo network, of course, and owls can't seem to find him, either."

"He's avoiding us."

"Yes, and anyone else whose opinion on the new law is different from his."

"Arthur has to know the law will be challenged," Hermione said in a frustrated tone. "I've made no secret of the fact that I've had a brief ready to be filed as soon as it passed, and I know at least two others who are prepared to file challenges, as well."

"I also have a challenge ready to be filed, but it will be months before any of them make it before the Wizengamot," Snape said.

"Yes, but when they have the opportunity to examine *all* the data I collected and the alternative solutions that should be available by then, the law will be repealed."

"They had the data ..."

"They didn't have all of it."

"What?"

"The data submitted to the Wizengamot was incomplete. I don't know why Arthur did it, but he removed a number of tables from my reports. He presented skewed data, which made the crisis seem worse than it actually is. The birth rate *is* declining, but not nearly as much or as fast as the Wizengamot has been led to believe. Arthur also failed to include any of the information about the charms and potions that will, given just a few more months, reverse the trends of the past several years."

"How do you know he altered your data?" Snape asked.

"The *Prophet* article included my research reports the Wizengamot gave the paper copies because they felt it was important for the public to realise how severe the crisis is, and to understand why such drastic action is necessary. When I compared the published copies against my originals, I noticed the discrepancies."

"That explains how the Wizengamot was 'convinced'," Snape commented.

"Unfortunately, the only way I can present the missing information to them is through my challenge to the new law, and as you said, that may take months."

"And in the meantime ..."

"Yes. In the meantime the new law will be enforced."

"Perhaps immigrating to America won't be so bad," Snape mused aloud.

"And who'll finish the potions if you do that?" Hermione demanded.

"They don't make potions in America?" Snape asked in a reasonable tone.

"The toxic magic is concentrated here."

"Someone else can finish the potions. I'll leave my notes."

"Of all the bloody selfish, thoughtless, *heartless* ..."

Snape watched Hermione stomping across his parlour. In particular, he watched a stray curl as it jounced in time to her angry tirade.

"... to *America*, of all places. Abandoning the rest of us to the not-so-tender mercies ..."

Snape grasped her arm as she passed by him for the third time his parlour wasn't very large, as most of it had been given over to house Snape's home laboratory. It was further diminished by the work table that Hermione and Filius shared and a wobbly old bookcase. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, woman! Get hold of yourself," he snapped out. "I'm not going to America."

"You're not?"

"What the bloody fuck would I do in America?"

"Then why the bloody fuck did you say something so stupid?" She shook off his arm.

"Because the very thought of having to get married frightens me almost as much as the thought of living without magic. I'm hoping that avoiding the issue will make it will go away." He was rubbing at his forearm.

"Believe me, it won't." Hermione was calmer now.

"I'm really going to have to get married, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are, and so am I."

"Weasley might not have married wife number four yet," Snape offered.

"I'd sooner marry Crabbe or Goyle," Hermione stated flatly.

Snape had a sudden, horrifying thought.

"Might he have had anything to do with this? The younger Weasley, I mean. Could he have got hold of your papers and altered them before his father read them? As I recall, Arthur frequently brought work home with him. If Weasley believed the marriage law would give him another opportunity to *connect* with you again ..."

"Ron?" Hermione snorted in a credible imitation of Snape. "Ron hasn't willingly picked up a book since we left Hogwarts, and the only newspaper he reads is *Quidditch Today*. He wouldn't have made it through the first paragraph of any of my research papers."

"Somebody knew which data to skew and which information to exclude from the reports that made it to the Wizengamot. It certainly seems out of character for Arthur to force through legislation he knows will be repugnant to so many people unless he truly believed it was the only way. He's always been scrupulously fair and honest almost to the point of tedium."

"Well, it wasn't Ron," Hermione said emphatically. She paused a moment as though debating with herself whether to say anything further. When she spoke again, her tone was softer. "Besides, I don't think he'll be on the list."

Snape arched a brow. "Oh?"

"He's been married three times, but he doesn't have any children. All of his wives have remarried. His first two wives each have a child with their new husbands. His third ex-wife is pregnant now." She paused again and then ploughed on. "Ron insisted on a paternity charm. It seemed there had been a brief reconciliation, and he was convinced the child was his."

"But it wasn't."

"No."

Snape was thoughtful. "If he's sterile, he has no incentive to get this law enacted, even if he had the ability to understand and manipulate the information," Snape concluded.

Before they could speculate any further on how the data might have been altered, there was a loud whoosh as his Floo activated.

The flames flared emerald, and then two rolls of parchment spit out of the fire and landed on the hearth rug. A moment later the green flames were gone.

Snape eyed the parchments warily. "They're from the Ministry."

"I suppose those are the registration forms," Hermione said as she twisted her hands together.

"Yes, I suppose they are." His fingers made their habitual journey from forearm to neck.

They stared at the parchments for a few moments, neither really wanting to acknowledge what they represented.

"I ... I suppose we should at least *look* at the forms ..." Hermione finally said.

"Bloody hell," Snape growled as he bent down and picked up his parchment. "Let's get this over with."

He unrolled the parchment and began reading.

"The bastards," he shouted. "The bloody fucking bastards!" He crumpled the parchment and threw it into the fireplace. Before he could aim his wand at it, however, it flew out of the hearth, smoothed itself out, and neatly re-rolled itself.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked as she bent down to pick up her own parchment. She unrolled it and skimmed it quickly. She seemed to shrink in upon herself as the words burned into her brain.

"Now do you see?"

"They've changed the time table," she whispered.

"The registration forms must be returned within seven days instead of fourteen," Snape said.

Hermione continued to read. "The fertility examination must take place within fourteen days," she muttered, "the Declaration of Betrothal must be filed within thirty days, and the marriage itself must happen within thirty days after that."

She heard a strangled gasp and looked up to find Snape staring at her with an expression that was the closest she'd ever seen to panic on his face. "We've less than ninety days before we have to ... have to ..." He paused, and then he rubbed his face with his hands. "Oh, Merlin, I can't believe this is happening."

"Neither can I," Hermione said.

"I've known for months this day would come. I thought I was prepared."

"First it was a hypothetical possibility," Hermione said. "Then it was a remote possibility."

"Now it's actuality, and I realise I'm not prepared at all."

"What are we going to do?" Hermione asked.

"Well, since you've already vetoed the idea of emigrating, I'd say we'd better work our arses off and finish the charms and potions that will put an end to this farce."

"What if we sent the correct data to the *Prophet*?" Hermione asked in a desperate tone. "If people knew that the Wizengamot didn't have all the facts when they made their decision, there would be pressure applied to hear the challenges sooner."

"The *Prophet* is nothing but a mouthpiece for the Ministry," Snape said. "They won't publish anything that contradicts the official party line."

"What about *The Quibbler*? I could ask Luna ..."

"Brilliant. They can put the information right next to the article about the latest Wrackspurt sighting. And it will be taken just as seriously."

"Do you have a better solution?"

"Perfect the potions; master the charms; make this reprehensible law unnecessary. Perhaps if we're very, very lucky, we'll find a solution before either one of us actually has to be bound in unholy matrimony."

Hermione sighed. "I'd better contact Filius and tell him to prepare for some long days, then, hadn't I?"

"Indeed," Snape said. "Sleep is about to become a rare indulgence for all of us. I may be forced to marry, but I won't do it until I've exhausted every other alternative, including using the Imperius on Arthur Weasley if I ever see him again!"

In a small office at the end of a long, dark corridor on the deepest level of the Ministry of Magic, someone else was reading the article in the *Daily Prophet*. This person wasn't angry and upset as Severus Snape and Hermione Granger had been, however. In fact, the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages was smiling. There were a couple of old sayings about revenge. One said it was sweet, and the other said it was a dish best served cold. This dish was as cold and sweet as a scoop of Florean Fortescue's finest ice cream. Hermione Granger and Severus Snape would pay dearly for every indignity and insult. It had taken years to prepare the bait and set the trap, but it was ready to be sprung now. The Special Coordinator put the paper aside and smiled even more broadly.

Author's Note: This story was written for the Potter Place's Variety Challenge. This is the prompt I chose: Something Old Revisit a once popular challenge. I chose to revisit the Marriage Law Challenge, but I've placed the story in a post-DH timeline.

Two

Chapter 2 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Two

Three weeks later, Snape, Hermione, and Filius Flitwick were having a quick breakfast in Snape's kitchen before they went back to work. They were all irritable and exhausted, but they were also determined to find a way to counteract the toxic magic which, like an invisible fog, had blanketed the magical world after the defeat of the Dark Lord.

"The acacia sap seems to increase the motility of the sperm cells," Snape commented as he speared a mushroom.

"Yes, but if there is no ovum released, it doesn't matter how motile the sperm are," Filius said.

"I'm working on another potion that addresses that issue," Snape said. "It's been very difficult to adjust the dosage, however. Either no ovum is released, or a dozen or more are."

Filius shook his head. "Not a viable solution. No woman could successfully gestate that many embryos at one time."

"I know that, Filius," Snape said irritably. "I was commenting on the progress of my work; I didn't claim it was a viable solution!"

"Don't snap at me."

"Stop it, both of you," Hermione interjected before the argument could escalate. Lack of sleep and lack of progress had combined to make everyone irascible. "Bickering among ourselves isn't going to accomplish anything."

"You're right, you're right," Filius said in his squeaky voice. "My apologies, Severus."

Snape waved his hand dismissively. "I'm beginning to wonder if anything we do will make a difference."

"Of course it will," Hermione said. She slid a portion of scrambled eggs onto her plate.

"Have I ever told you how tiresome your Gryffindor optimism is, Miss Granger?" Snape said with a scowl.

"Incessantly, Professor Snape."

"I haven't been anyone's professor for more than a decade, thank the gods," Snape replied. "I'm quite content to work here at Spinner's End."

"Minerva would have you back in a moment, you know," Filius said.

"Not bloody likely. I've long fulfilled my duty to Dumbledore and the Order." As was his usual, subconscious gesture, he touched his forearm and then his neck. "I'll never set foot in a classroom again," he added.

"Really, Severus," Hermione said in a bantering tone. "We weren't all dunderheads, were we?"

Snape gave a soft snort. "The shining stars were few, and most of them were at least a little tarnished about the edges mostly due to the unsavoury company they kept."

"I do believe he's referring to you, Hermione," Filius said.

"Oh, yes, they certainly were an unsavoury lot," Hermione said dryly. "Harry Potter, otherwise known as the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, and the Destroyer of Evil; Ron Weasley, best friend of the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, and the Destroyer of Evil; Neville Longbottom, pure-blood son of two of the heroes of the First Wizarding War, and hero in his own right, otherwise known as the Great Snake Slayer, also a friend of the Boy Who Lived, etcetera, etcetera. Need I go on?"

Filius was laughing so hard he nearly tumbled off the raised stool he was sitting on, and even Snape was chuckling.

"Very well, maybe you weren't as tarnished as some," Snape conceded.

"Thank you," Hermione said as she returned her attention to her eggs, which were now barely lukewarm.

A moment later, she pushed her plate away.

"Something wrong with your eggs?" Snape asked.

"What? Oh, no, they're fine. I'm just a bit ... distracted. Has the paper come yet?"

Snape shoved his own plate aside. "I'd nearly managed to forget, but, no, there's been no sign of the delivery owl."

"Oh, dear," Filius interjected. "It's today, isn't it? The Ministry will be publishing the names of all the fertile witches and wizards."

"A veritable smorgasbord of male potency and female fecundity," Snape said with a sneer.

They heard the Floo activate, and then there was a loud thump.

"Apparently, the paper is too large for the delivery owl," Snape said as he got to his feet and moved into the parlour. "They've used the Floo."

Two minutes later, Snape and Hermione were kneeling shoulder-to-shoulder with the paper spread out on the floor in front of them.

"Is it alphabetical?" Hermione asked as she ran her fingers up and down the small, crowded print. "Where are the G's?"

"Between the F's and the H's," Snape replied. "Just where they've always been."

"Arse," Hermione muttered. "Ah, here we go ... Gibbon, Elford; Goldstein, Anthony; Goyle, Bertram; Goyle, Gregory of course; Grady, Gilda; Grady, Glenda; Granger, Hermione; Graves, Merton ..."

Hermione sat back on her heels, a look of shock on her face. Snape continued his study of the paper.

"Smethley, Veronica; Smith, Alton; Smith, Gordon; Smith, Inez; Smith, John; Smith, Zacharias; Smythe, Filomina; Smythe, Georgina; Snape, Severus; Spinnet, Alicia ..."

He stood up and kicked the paper viciously, as though it were responsible for his predicament. "Bloody fucking hell," he snarled.

"I'll assume you're both on the list," Filius said with a sympathetic look.

"If I'm lucky, I'll get someone with a modicum of intelligence and good sense," Snape said. "But if my luck runs as it usually does, I'll end up with Dolores Umbridge."

"You will allow the Ministry to choose a wife for you?" Filius asked.

"What choice do I have?" Snape said. "My work for the Order and the Dark Lord precluded a social life. I've never met most of the witches on this list. I wouldn't know how to begin a dialogue with any of them, never mind a courtship."

"And you, Hermione?" Filius asked.

"I've buried myself in my work for years. The only wizards who've ever shown the slightest interest in me, romantically, are Viktor Krum and Ron. Viktor is dead and Ron ..." She retrieved the pile of newspaper and quickly scanned the W's. "Ron isn't on the list."

"So you'll allow the Ministry to make the most important decision of *your* life, as well?"

"What else can I do?"

Filius shook his head as his gaze swung back and forth between them. "How is it that two intuitive and intelligent people such as you are have managed to completely overlook the most logical and obvious solution?"

Both Hermione and Snape looked at Filius expectantly.

"You must marry each other!"

After a moment of shocked silence, both Snape and Hermione reacted, their words tripping over each other's as they shouted at Filius.

"I thought you said you had a *solution* to our dilemma!"

"What makes you think we're even remotely suited?"

"... argumentative, bossy, and stubborn ..."

"... opinionated, sarcastic, and surly, and those are his *good* points ..."

"... and a bloody *Gryffindor* to boot!" Snape finished with a sneer.

"... besides, he's a *Slytherin*!" Hermione countered with a matching sneer.

There were two chests heaving in indignation and two pairs of eyes burning with fury by the time they wound themselves down.

"Are you quite finished?" Filius asked in a soft tone.

"Quite," Hermione said huffily.

Snape merely snorted.

"From what I've observed of your relationship ..." Filius began.

"'Relationship'? We don't have a 'relationship'!" Hermione said. She crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at the diminutive wizard.

"You'd better have Poppy examine your eyes, then," Snape added. "And your head, as well."

"I thought you were finished," Filius said with infinite patience.

Hermione opened her mouth as though to speak and then snapped it shut.

Snape ground his teeth but didn't speak.

"As I was saying, from what I've observed of your relationship, I think you would have a successful, if a bit tumultuous marriage. The two of you are intelligent, methodical, principled, and, I dare say, passionate. You've worked together professionally for years, and although you've had disagreements, you've managed to work through them without any bloodletting. I've heard you exchange barbs, yes; but I've also heard you laugh together at your own foibles. You respect each other ..."

"We don't love each other!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Do you love Gregory Goyle, or Alton Smith, or any of the other wizards on the Ministry's list of *eligible bachelors*?" Filius asked.

"Of course I don't; I don't even know most of them."

"But you know Severus."

"Well ... yes, I know him. And you're right, I respect him. I'm not sure that's enough for a successful marriage, however."

"It's more than many will have when the Ministry starts playing matchmaker," Filius said reasonably.

Hermione turned her head to observe Snape. He was standing with his hands hanging loosely at his sides. His lips were curled into their customary sneer and his hair hung in an untidy curtain around his face. But it was a clean, shiny curtain and not at all greasy. There were two spots of colour high on his cheeks, and his dark eyes were hooded, hiding any reaction to her exchange with Filius. She looked away before he could meet her eyes.

Would marriage to Severus Snape be palatable or even tolerable? She closed her eyes and sighed. Would marriage to Gregory Goyle be any more palatable or tolerable? She'd been working with Severus for nearly five years, and she'd never had even the slightest interest in him in a romantic or sexual way. Of course, she hadn't taken a romantic interest in anyone, not counting Ron, in even longer than that. Mostly, she'd sublimated the normal, physical urges that a young woman in her twenties usually experienced. She allowed herself to think of Severus as a man and a potential sexual partner, rather than just a colleague. She glanced over at him again. His lips were thin, but when they weren't sneering or snarling, they had a nice shape. He was lean, but not as thin as he'd been before the war. His hands were well-formed with long, slender fingers. She tried to imagine kissing him and didn't find the thought at all unpleasant. The thought of kissing Gregory Goyle, however, had her swallowing hard to keep from vomiting.

There was also the matter of character. Severus was a man of honour and true moral fibre. Following Dumbledore's own orders, he'd done the unthinkable. His loyalty to Dumbledore had nearly cost him his life. Nagini's bite had been true and deep, and if Severus hadn't been foresighted enough to vaccinate himself with Nagini's own venom, he wouldn't be standing here today. As it was, he'd nearly bled to death. He'd been saved when one of the house elves sent to retrieve his body realised that he was unconscious, but not dead. Poppy Pomfrey had managed to stop the bleeding and save his life. When all the facts came out, he'd been cleared of any charges of wrong-doing. The Order had hailed him as a hero, and even the Ministry had been forced to recognize his contributions to the Light. But being vindicated and being accepted were two very different things. Hermione knew that he still suffered a good deal of ostracism. In spite of that, he'd turned his home into a laboratory, and he'd invited her and Filius to join him in the search to find a way to counteract the toxic magic that Voldemort had, in a final act of madness and hatred, unleashed upon the wizarding world.

He *could* have fled to America, or any of a thousand other places, and put himself beyond the reach of the Ministry and its absurd law; she'd heard that a number of witches and wizards had done just that. He hadn't, though. He'd stayed, determined to perfect the fertility potions that were so desperately needed. He'd stayed to help the very people who held him in contempt and still didn't understand the sacrifices he had made.

All these thoughts skittered through her mind in just a few moments. She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"Filius, that a very good idea." She spoke quietly, but clearly. "Severus and I should get married. To each other."

"Splendid!"

Snape felt a sudden surge of emotion flare through him when he heard Hermione's words. His mind turned it over and over in a millisecond, trying to analyse it. When he recognised it, he wanted to deny it because the only name he could put to it was 'relief'. He, Severus Snape, former Death Eater, decorated (however reluctantly) war hero, esteemed Potions master, and, as of this morning, one of the Ministry's *eligible bachelors*, was relieved that a bossy, infuriating, irritating, *former student* thought that marrying him was a 'good idea'.

"Do I have any say in this," Snape lashed out before he could think too long about his emotional instability, "or will you bash me over the head with a club and drag me off into a cave by my hair?"

Snape felt a small stab of shame as he watched Hermione flinch slightly under his harsh words. She recovered quickly, however, and faced him squarely.

"My apologies, Severus, for being presumptuous," she said in a tone that didn't sound at all apologetic. "I had no idea that the thought of marrying Dolores Umbridge was so appealing to you. Or is it that the thought of marrying *me* is so unappealing?"

Snape ran his eyes up and down her body slowly, and he smiled to himself as she flushed. Although he'd never given much thought to her in a sexual way (All men fantasised a *bit*, didn't they?), she certainly wasn't unappealing. And he had to admit, if only to himself, that Hermione's brilliant mind and ready wit were far more stimulating than another woman's lush curves or perfect features could ever be.

It wouldn't do, however, to make it too easy for her. He had a reputation as a difficult, complicated man, and he had no intention of allowing her to think he could be too readily manipulated. He was grateful, however, that she couldn't see his knees shaking under his robes!

"I didn't say that at all," Snape replied with a calmness he didn't feel. His fingers touched his arm and then his neck. "I just think there should be some ... discussion ... before we make such an important decision."

"What is there to discuss?"

"Can you cook?" Snape asked.

"Can I cook?"

"A man has to eat, you know."

Hermione huffed out an impatient breath. "No, *I can't* cook, but I know how to order take-away."

"As it happens, I enjoy cooking," Snape said in a superior tone. "Not that I have any objection to an occasional dinner out, or even some curry take-away."

"How fortunate can one witch be?"

Snape smiled slightly. "I don't have any elves here; do you know any housekeeping charms?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"No, but I know a few hairdressing charms."

Snape waved a hand airily. "No mind; I can teach you the basics."

Hermione's brow furrowed, but Snape seemed oblivious to her building temper.

"It's important that I get my rest," he continued. "You don't snore, do you?"

Hermione thrust her chin out.

"Like a hibernating bear and I'm a blanket-thief, as well!" she bellowed.

Somehow Snape managed to keep from laughing out loud as he watched her explode.

"Is this your idea of a discussion?" Hermione asked indignantly. "Did I ask you about cooking or cleaning, *orsnoring*?"

"I've just one more question," Snape said mildly.

"What now? Do you want to know if I pick my nose or leave my toe nail parings in the sink?"

"No, I want to know if you like pink."

"I detest it!"

Now Snape did laugh, and the sight of him laughing had Hermione giggling.

"Have you gone mad?" she asked.

"Perhaps I have," Snape said after he'd caught his breath. "But it seems we're betrothed," Snape said.

"So it seems," Hermione agreed.

Filius, who'd followed the exchange with mounting glee, was jumping up and down and clapping his hands together in delight.

"Oh, jolly good! Jolly good!" he squeaked.

Hermione and Snape, both of whom seemed to have completely forgotten the presence of the tiny wizard, turned to look at him.

"I didn't realise you were still here, Filius," Snape said.

"You were rather ... pre-occupied. Now that you've remembered I'm here, may I be the first to offer my congratulations?"

He held out his hand, and Snape took it. "Thank you, Filius."

"And to you, Hermione, my sincere good wishes." He tugged at her hand and Hermione leaned down to allow him to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you," she replied.

"I know that this is not the most auspicious of beginnings, but I have a very good feeling about this," Filius said. "Now, may I act as witness to your Declaration of Betrothal?"

Snape looked to Hermione, who nodded.

"We'd be honoured," Snape said sincerely.

"What do we have to do?" Hermione asked.

"We've already done it," Snape said as he draped his arm across her shoulder and turned her slightly. "Look."

He pointed to the Floo where a small roll of parchment hovered in the green flames.

Filius walked over and plucked it out of the hearth. He unrolled it and studied it.

"Looks like a standard-issue Ministry form, except for the provision that the marriage must take place within thirty days of the filing," he said.

"But we don't have to file it today, do we?" Hermione asked.

Filius looked it over again, and then he shook his head. "No, the required filing date is thirty days from today."

"We have sixty days, then, until we actually have to get married," Snape said.

"Are you two getting cold feet already?" Filius asked. He looked pointedly at Snape's arm, which was still resting across Hermione's shoulders.

Snape hastily dropped his arm, and Hermione took a side-step away from him.

"As a matter of fact, my feet are quite warm and toasty," Snape said, and Hermione nodded in agreement. "But if by some miracle, ~~w~~^{we} are able to perfect the potions and charms and get the information to the Wizengamot within those sixty days it won't be necessary to carry through our plan.

"It's not as if this is a love match, after all," he added. "We're merely colleagues rendering mutual assistance."

"I see," Filius said in an amused tone that clearly indicated he didn't see it that way at all. "And is that what you think as well, Hermione?"

"Well, I'd thought that we were more than 'merely colleagues', but at least we're not strangers."

"Better the devil you know, eh?" Filius said.

Neither Snape nor Hermione had a response to that comment.

Filius sighed softly as he re-rolled the form and dropped it onto the side table where it began to hum softly.

The issuance of marriage licences to witches and wizards who fell within the age requirements of the new law had been suspended during the process of determining fertility the whole point of the legislation, after all, was to insure that only fertile witches and wizards married. Allowing marriages to take place before that determination was made would have been counter-productive. Now that the lists had been published, however, there was a flurry of Declarations being sent in. The lucky witches and wizards who found their names on the lists, and who had been in a relationship before the law passed, were especially quick to file.

All Declarations were routed through the office of the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages. It was the Coordinator's job to make sure that both parties named on the Declaration were eligible to be married to each other under the provisions of the new law. Once that was ascertained, the Coordinator approved the Declaration, returned a copy to each person involved along with the reminder that the marriage itself had to take place within thirty days, and issued a marriage licence.

A copy of the Declaration was then filed, the names of the witch and wizard were crossed off the master list, and the list was updated. At the end of the thirty days allowed for the filing of the Declarations, it would be the Coordinator's responsibility to pair up the remaining witches and wizards using the unique skills that had led the Ministry to create the position in the first place. A letter would then be sent informing the witches and wizards that since they hadn't managed to get themselves betrothed, the Ministry had done it for them.

The Coordinator took this responsibility seriously. Already potential matches were being considered. Some were very obvious; Neville Longbottom needed someone strong and wise to guide him, and an older witch, such as Miranda Greengrass would make a perfect partner for him. Other matches were considered and rejected; Luna Lovegood, for instance, was far too flighty and dreamy for someone like Charley Weasley. Percy Weasley, on the other hand, might make a good choice. Of course, it was impossible to make final decisions until the thirty days expired, so all possibilities remained open.

Every day, the *Prophet* published the updated list of 'eligibles' along with the betrothal and wedding announcements.

As the days ticked away, the list got smaller and smaller. Two names, however, remained on each revised list Hermione Granger's and Severus Snape's.

As each work day closed, and those two names remained on the 'eligible' list, the Coordinator's spirits rose. It wasn't a surprise that neither of them could find someone willing to marry them. Hermione Granger was a bossy, stubborn, interfering troublemaker whose only asset had been her friendship with Harry Potter. And according to Arthur Weasley, who confided in the Coordinator, over the past few years even that association had cooled. Severus Snape was an abrasive, sarcastic, foul-tempered former Death Eater who had avoided Azkaban only because he had somehow convinced the Wizengamot to bring Dumbledore's portrait into the courtroom to testify on his behalf.

They had both filed challenges to the new law not that it would do them any good. The Coordinator allowed a small smile to broaden into a self-satisfied grin. It had been a small task to put a Procrastination Charm on the parchments. Now every person in the Ministry who touched the parchments, from the lowliest clerk to the Minister himself, would look at them and decide that whatever action was supposed to be initiated could wait another day. It was a handy little charm because it was self-limiting and would wear off in about a year even the most indecisive of bureaucrats had to take some sort of action eventually, after all.

But it meant that by the time the parchments were read, and the challenges were put on the Wizengamot's schedule, it would be far, far too late for the cheeky swot and the arrogant stiff-neck to do anything about their predicament.

Author's Note: This story was written for the Potter Place's Variety Challenge. This is the prompt I chose: Something Old Revisit a once popular challenge. I chose to revisit the Marriage Law Challenge, but I've placed the story in a post-DH timeline.

Three

Chapter 3 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Three

Severus Snape was in a foul mood. His mood had been foul for weeks, but today's was even worse than usual for two reasons.

The first was that today was the day that he and Hermione would have to file their Declaration of Betrothal. The form from the ministry had been sitting on a table in the parlour for the past thirty days. Each week, the warning hum got a little bit louder, but they had continued to ignore it. They were both determined to wait until the last day to actually file the Declaration. They had been sure that by this time they would have a solution, but it seemed they were no closer now than they had been thirty days ago.

The second reason was a gelatinous lump of purple slime that rested on the bottom of a standard number two silver cauldron. Another promising run of preliminary experiments had failed to develop into a viable potion, and he was at a loss to explain why. He Vanished the contents of the cauldron and then sat at his desk and pulled his calculations out to re-check them.

"This should have worked," he muttered. "It bloody-fucking-hell should have worked!"

An hour later, he had another batch of the potion started. He double-checked every ingredient for freshness and potency as he added it to the cauldron, and he weighed and measured everything twice. He was actually hoping that he had made a mistake on the first batch and that this one would turn out the way he knew it should.

A more realistic hope would be that he would win *Witch Weekly's* 'most charming smile' award. He snorted rather inelegantly at that thought. He knew he hadn't made a weight or measurement error in the potion. Nor had he over-heated it, over-stirred it, or exposed it to direct sunlight, which could ruin many potions. His home lab might not be in a dungeon, but it had no windows, and the door was charmed to block any sunlight that might seep through from the parlour.

With his calculations double-checked and the new batch of potion started, Snape had no reason to linger in the lab.

He sighed. He could no longer delay the inevitable.

He left his lab, slamming the door loudly as he did, and moved out into the parlour.

Hermione looked up from the parchment she and Filius had been studying.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"No," he snapped.

She might have tried to comfort him had she not felt the need to slam a door or two herself. She returned her eyes and her thoughts to the parchment in her hand, only half-listening to what he and Filius were talking about.

"I'll assume your latest effort was a failure?" Filius asked.

"Miserable."

"Which potion was this one?"

"It was supposed to thin out the mucus around the cervix to facilitate the little swimmers' journey toward nirvana. It should have worked, but it didn't. The separate components do their job, but when they're combined ... let's just say that a Triwizard champion couldn't have swum through the mess at the bottom of that cauldron. Were it actually used, it would act more as an impediment to conception than an aid."

Filius nodded his head in sympathy. "Hermione and I were just going over our latest efforts, as well. We change things add inflections, remove emphases but nothing seems to make a difference. It's frustrating to say the least."

"I've begun another batch ..."

"What did you say?" Hermione asked as she grabbed his arm.

Snape glared at her. "If you're going to interrupt a conversation, you could at least keep up with it."

"I'll apologise for my bad manners later. Now, what did you say?"

"I said that I've begun another batch of the failed potion."

"No, I heard that part. What did you say before? Something about the potion being an impediment rather than a help."

"I said that the potion, which was supposed to thin out the mucus around the cervix, would, if used, actually increase its viscosity."

"Thinner mucus would make it easier for the sperm to travel through the cervix, correct?"

"Yes. And thicker mucus tends to clog the opening of the cervix, making it virtually impossible for the sperm to get through."

"Which is the exact opposite of what you intended."

Snape rolled his eyes. "That's what I just said."

"Have you tried brewing a birth control potion lately?"

"The last thing the wizarding world needs is a birth control potion," Snape said rather snidely.

"Exactly."

It took a second for Snape's logical, well-trained mind to make the leap that Hermione's more intuitive brain had already made.

"The potion's effect was the *opposite* of what it should have been."

"We've had similar results with every charm we've tried, haven't we?" Hermione asked as she turned toward Filius.

"Indeed," Filius agreed, and then he shook his head. "Can the solution really be as simple as reversing the intent of our charms and potions?"

"There's only one way to find out," Snape said as he turned back toward his lab.

"We've a lot of work to do as well," Filius said. He climbed up onto his high stool and spread out a sheaf of parchments. He adjusted his glasses, dipped his quill into an inkwell, and bent over his work.

Hermione was soon seated next to him, her quill scribbling along in tandem with his.

The next time Snape emerged from his lab, it was after four o'clock, and his stomach was rumbling.

A few minutes later, he had put together a small meal of freshly sliced bread, chunks of cheddar cheese, and fresh fruit. He also had a pot of tea ready to pour.

He stuck his head out of the kitchen and called out to his colleagues, who were still bent over their work. "Filius, Hermione come have something to eat."

"Is it lunch time already?" Hermione asked as she lifted her head.

"Lunch time? It's half gone four," Snape replied. "We're closer to supper than to lunch."

Filius wasted no time. He threw down his quill and jumped off his high stool quite nimbly for a wizard his age. "Merlin bless you, Severus," he said. "I'm famished."

"Now that I think about it," Hermione said, "so am I." She stacked her parchments neatly and joined the two men in the kitchen.

They talked quietly about their work as they ate. They were on their second pot of tea when there was a sudden, loud screeching noise from the parlour.

"What the bloody hell ..." Filius began. He stood and moved toward the sound.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Snape shouted. He nearly ran Filius over as he pushed past him out of the kitchen, fumbling his wand out of his sleeve as he went.

Hermione realised what the sound was just a fraction of a second after Snape did.

"Hurry, Filius! Hurry!" Hermione urged. "You have to witness it!" She grabbed Filius's hand and was nearly dragging him as she hurried after Snape. She had her wand in her hand, as well.

Their Declaration of Betrothal, which was still sitting on the table where Filius had placed it thirty days ago, was glowing with an eerie, reddish light, and it was emitting an ear-splitting whine.

"Hermione, give me your hand!" Snape reached out and Hermione placed her hand in his.

"I'm here," Filius squeaked out. "Do it, Severus. Quickly!"

"*Locus originatum!*" Snape shouted as he pointed his wand at the parchment.

It disappeared with a loud pop.

"Did we make it?" Hermione asked anxiously.

Snape glanced at the mantle clock. "It hasn't quite gone five yet," he said.

"How could we have forgotten? God only knows which odious cretin I'd have ended up with."

Snape could feel her hand trembling in his. He tugged on her hand gently, turning her to face him.

"At least I'm not a cretin," he said in a soothing tone.

"Are you fishing for compliments, Severus?" she asked.

"Me?" he asked mockingly.

She leaned into him and rested her head on his chest. She inhaled deeply through her nose.

"Sage, hyssops, cedar, balsam, and ... surprisingly ... lemon balm. Not the least bit odious."

His arms lifted to hold her close against his body.

"You should have gone into potions instead of wasting your time on charms," he said.

"Excuse me?" Filius spoke in an indignant tone.

With her head nestled on his chest, Hermione could both hear and feel the deep rumbling of Snape's amused chuckle.

"No offence intended, Filius," he added.

"Too late," Filius muttered, and Snape chuckled again.

The Floo in the office of the Special Coordinator had been extremely busy all day as those who had waited until the last day to make a suitable and sometimes desperate match filed their Declarations.

As the Declarations arrived, the Coordinator reviewed and approved them. Most of them were routine, but there were a few surprises. Who would have thought, for instance, that Pansy Parkinson, the spoiled and pampered daughter of an old, wealthy pure-blood family, would have consented to become the wife of Seamus Finnegan, a half-blood with no name or money? And what last-minute negotiations had taken place to pair a thug like Theodore Nott with a gentle soul like Parvati Patil?

Not that the Coordinator really cared who married whom. Every voluntary Declaration had been approved without question. There were only two people whose marriage prospects mattered. The afternoon waned and no Declaration of Betrothal for either Hermione Granger or Severus Snape arrived in the Floo. The Coordinator smiled; the plan was about to bear fruit, and the anticipation was intense.

The Coordinator's Declarations for Granger and Snape were ready to go. They'd been ready for weeks, actually. The Coordinator's only regret was that it would be impossible to see their faces when they learned the names of the spouses that had been chosen for them!

It was nearly five o'clock when the Floo activated again. A moment later, the warning charm signalled that incoming communications were closed. Any Declarations filed now could be approved or rejected at the discretion of the Coordinator.

Someone really was waiting until the last minute, the Coordinator thought as the last-to-arrive parchment unrolled itself on the desk.

"No! No! No!"

The frustrated shouts would have been heard on the highest floor of the Ministry if Privacy and Silencing Charms had not been in place on the Coordinator's office.

The joyous anticipation that had been present just a few short moments before was replaced first by disbelief and then by an almost immeasurable rage.

It wasn't fair! Five years of planning thwarted with only seconds to spare. It wasn't fair, and it couldn't be allowed!

With a flick of a wand, the offending document disappeared. It wasn't the Coordinator's fault, was it, if a Declaration got lost somewhere in the maze of Floo connections between its origin and its destination?

Another wand flick and the prepared Declarations were on their way.

If Hermione Granger and Severus Snape thought they had found a way to escape retribution, they were about to find out how very wrong they were!

Snape was surprised when the Floo in his parlour flared green barely two minutes after he'd sent their Declaration to the Ministry.

"Our confirmation is here already," he said as he scooped the rolled parchment from the cool, green flames.

"Let me see," Hermione said. She reached for the parchment, but Snape held it over his head and out of her reach.

"Not even married yet and already you're trying to read my mail," Snape grumbled.

Before she could reply, the Floo blazed again, and another parchment appeared.

"Read your own copy," he said as he plucked the second parchment from the Floo and handed it to Hermione.

"Thanks," she said. She slipped the tie from the parchment and unrolled it.

As her eyes skimmed the form, Hermione felt the blood drain from her head and the air leave her lungs in a strangled gasp.

"This can't be ..."

"Hermione ... Hermione!"

Through the buzzing in her ears she vaguely recognised Snape's voice calling her name.

The parchment slipped through her numbed fingers, and her knees began to buckle.

She didn't resist when Snape guided her to the sofa and sat her down.

"Bloody hell, it can't be that much of a shock to know we're to be married," he said. He was rubbing his neck.

Hermione shook her head. "Not you," she mumbled.

"Not me? What do you mean not me? Of course it's me!"

Filius picked up the dropped parchment and began to read out loud.

"To Miss Hermione Granger: Having failed to file a valid Declaration of Betrothal before the required date and time, the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages has chosen an appropriate match for you from the list of eligible wizards."

"We bloody well filed on time!" Snape shouted.

Hermione shook her head. "It gets worse."

Filius continued to read. "It is with hope for a fruitful union that the Special Coordinator has chosen Mr. Mundungus Fletcher to be your husband. Your marriage is scheduled to take place four weeks from today at two o'clock in the afternoon at the newly-created Office of the Extraordinary Registrar, which is located on the second floor of the Ministry. You may invite up to six people to witness the ceremony and share your special day ..."

"Mundungus Fletcher," Hermione whispered. "I'm to be married to Mundungus Fletcher? Talk about your odious cretins ..."

"There must be a mistake," Snape said. "Fletcher is surely older than sixty ..."

Hermione shook her head again. "The law stated that witches and wizards between the ages of twenty and sixty were required to register, but it didn't exclude older people from volunteering. As long as they passed their fertility exam, anyone could be on the list."

"As a matter of fact," Filius put in, "there were a number of elderly wizards who were quite eager to have the opportunity to find a young, nubile wife."

"Perverts," Snape muttered.

"You must contact the Ministry in the morning and get this matter settled," Filius said. "It's obvious that the Declaration you and Hermione sent and these two crossed in the Floo. Once the Special Coordinator is made aware that you've already filed, these will be voided. If there's a problem, I'll make an official statement. I *did* witness your

Declaration, after all."

"Thank you, Filius," Snape said.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione said. She was starting to feel better now that she knew it was just an easily remedied mistake. She turned to Snape.

"Not that it matters, but who did the Ministry pick for you, Severus?" she asked.

"I never even opened my form," he said. He picked it up from where he had flung it when he rushed to Hermione's side.

His already pale complexion turned ashen as he read.

"It's a good thing I won't have to go through with *this*," he said with a shudder. "It would be the shortest marriage on record as I'd probably poison her within a week."

"Who is it?"

"Sybill Trelawney. The wedding is scheduled fifteen minutes after yours."

"That old fraud? She has to be another one of the 'volunteers'. She was fifty if she was a day back when I was in school."

"Looks like she's finally got her heart's desire," Filius said. "Wasn't she always inviting you up to her tower room for *æreading*?"

Snape flushed and threw a withering glare at the tiny wizard.

"There was never anything between Sybill Trelawney and me."

Nothing except that bloody fucking prophecy I had the misfortune to overhear he thought with a twinge of conscience.

"Oh, but she would have liked there to have been. Which is why, I'm sure, she's made a special point of asking for you!" Filius said with an amused smile. "She probably thinks you and she are fated to be together."

"Not bloody likely," Snape muttered.

"Let's write out our letter, then," Hermione said. "I want to send it first thing in the morning. I certainly don't want *The Daily Prophet* announcing my engagement to Mundungus Fletcher."

In spite of Hermione's fervent wishes, the next day's edition of *The Daily Prophet* did, indeed, announce her betrothal to Mundungus Fletcher. It also announced Snape's arranged marriage to Sybill Trelawney, as well as several other arranged marriages between the remaining eligible witches and wizards.

The letter that Hermione and Snape sent to the Special Coordinator was answered within hours. Unfortunately, the response was not at all what they had anticipated.

Dear Miss Granger,

The Ministry of Magic and the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages are not responsible for lost or delayed Declarations of Betrothal.

The urgent nature of the crisis in the wizarding world makes it imperative that all eligible witches and wizards marry and begin procreating as quickly as possible. Therefore, when no Declaration was received from you, an appropriate match was arranged.

Although not obligated to do so, the Special Coordinator will contact your arranged partner, Mundungus Fletcher, to determine if he has been able to make another match and would be amenable to dissolving your current Declaration of Betrothal.

You will be contacted with further information.

Congratulations on your upcoming marriage

Snape's letter was identical to Hermione's with the exception of the salutation and the name of his arranged spouse.

Snape swore loudly and inventively after reading his letter.

"The Declaration was *not* delayed. And if it's 'lost', then it's the bloody Ministry that's gone and lost it!"

"Calm down, Severus," Filius said. "I'll send my statement in. I'm sure this misunderstanding can be resolved quickly."

Filius sat at the desk and picked up his quill. He wrote for several minutes, and then he sent the letter on its way.

The next day, he received a reply. In the politest of terms, the letter from the Special Coordinator stated that since no Declaration of Betrothal had ever been received from Miss Hermione Granger and Mr. Severus Snape there was no way to verify that such a Declaration had ever existed, much less that he had witnessed it. The letter further stated that the Ministry did not appreciate his belated attempt to assist Miss Granger and Mr. Snape in circumventing the law simply because they were not pleased with the choices that had been made for them. He was then advised that any continued attempt to undermine the Ministry would result in legal action that included, but was not limited to, fines and/or incarceration in Azkaban.

"I'll go to the Ministry," Filius said. "I'll demand to see Arthur Weasley!"

"No, Filius," Hermione said. "We can't allow you to incur the Ministry's wrath on our behalf."

"Indeed," Snape agreed. "Hermione and I will continue the fight. We and our fertility are valuable assets. They'll hardly throw us into Azkaban."

"You're right, of course," Filius said. "I suppose the best thing we can do is continue working to perfect the new charms and potions and hope that the Special Coordinator can convince Sybill and Mundungus to see reason."

Hermione and Snape sent letters to the Ministry every day. Each day they received a letter in return stating that their case was being 'looked into'.

They even tried sending letters directly to Sybill Trelawney and Mundungus Fletcher. Hermione's letters to Mundungus were all returned marked 'undeliverable'. And while Snape's letters to Sybill Trelawney weren't returned, neither were they answered.

Each day when he arrived to work, Filius offered to go to the Ministry to try to reason with Arthur and/or the Special Coordinator. Every day Hermione and Snape refused.

One week before she was scheduled to report to the Ministry of Magic to marry Mundungus Fletcher, Hermione received another letter from the Special Coordinator.

The letter arrived just before five o'clock, ensuring that it would be too late for Hermione to make any kind of a response before the Ministry closed for the day.

The letter read:

Dear Miss Granger,

In an effort to satisfy all parties, while still remaining within the spirit and, more importantly, the letter of the Conjugal Required Accelerated Procreation Statute, I have been in contact with Mr. Mundungus Fletcher, the wizard chosen for you when you failed to file a Declaration of Betrothal by the required date and time. On your behalf, I enquired of Mr. Fletcher if he would be willing to seek another spouse, thus releasing you from your obligation to marry him.

Mr. Fletcher declined, citing a 'deplorable lack of witches able to meet his exacting standards'

Snape gave a sharp snort as he read over Hermione's shoulder. "Mundungus Fletcher wouldn't know what the word 'deplorable' meant!"

"And 'exacting standards'?" Hermione added. "Any woman with a pulse would meet his exacting standards."

In fact, the Special Coordinator's letter continued, Mr. Fletcher stated that he was quite eager to marry you.

Your request, therefore, to be released from your betrothal to Mr. Mundungus Fletcher is denied.

Your marriage will take place, as scheduled, Tuesday next at two o'clock in the afternoon.

You are reminded that there are severe penalties for failure to comply with the statute. You may, of course, exercise your Right of Exemption at any time before the ceremony begins.

A staff member will meet you at the visitors' entrance to the Ministry to escort you to the Office of the Extraordinary Registrar. Please arrive at least fifteen minutes before the ceremony is scheduled to begin.

Hermione tossed the letter down in disgust.

"That's it, then."

"I suppose my letter is on its way as well," Snape said.

He'd hardly got the words out before his Floo activated, and another official-looking parchment began to hover in the emerald flames.

"If we ignore it, do you think it will go away?" he asked.

A moment later, the parchment sailed out of the Floo and began to circle Snape's head, buzzing like an angry swarm of bees.

"There's your answer," Hermione said.

Snape's letter also stated that the witch chosen for him was looking forward to marrying him and had no wish to dissolve the Declaration of Betrothal.

"They're providing an 'escort'," Hermione said with a frown. "They might as well have said they were putting us under guard to make sure we don't try to skip out."

"I suppose this means it's too late for you to emigrate, isn't it?" Filius asked in a hopeful tone.

Snape nodded. "The Ministry has stopped issuing Portkeys, and most people can't Apparate over long distances, so it's become nearly impossible to leave Great Britain. Lupin heads the Aurors' office now, and he tells me that me that Aurors, on direct orders from the Special Coordinator, are being sent out to round up those who left before the more stringent restrictions were put in place. When they're found, they're being brought back. Their wands are being confiscated until after the marriages take place. If they refuse to go through with the marriage, their magic is bound."

"I never would have believed that Arthur Weasley would support such actions," Filius said. "The Ministry is surely acting out of desperation."

"That may be so, but we've no intention of feeding into that desperation. If Mundungus Fletcher and Sybill Trelawney have such a strong wish to help the wizarding world out of its current crisis, they can marry each other and Merlin help any children who may issue from that union!"

He turned to Hermione. "Have you packed your bag?"

Hermione patted her pocket. "I've shrunk it down and tucked it away. I'm ready whenever you are."

"What are you two planning?" Filius asked.

"Perhaps it's better if you don't know," Snape said.

"Nonsense! I not only want to know, I want to help you in any way I can."

Snape looked to Hermione who nodded.

"Bigamy is still illegal in the wizarding world, isn't it, Filius?" Snape asked slyly.

Filius looked puzzled for a moment, but then he smiled. "Oh, how perfect! Where will you go? Gretna Green?"

Snape shook his head. "There's a twenty-one day waiting period there. We're going to Cyprus the documentation needed is minimal, and the residency requirement is just three days for a Special Licence. We were afraid something like this would happen; we began making plans two weeks ago. We'll establish residency beginning tomorrow, file our paperwork on Friday afternoon, and be married on Saturday."

"And you didn't tell me?" Filius squeaked out indignantly. "I thought we were friends!"

"We were hoping that we wouldn't have to resort to this," Hermione said. "We would have preferred having the Ministry simply acknowledge that ~~w~~ad filed a proper Declaration. If it had, we could have married with the Ministry's open, if misguided, blessing."

"There was no logical reason for the Special Coordinator to deny receiving our Declaration," Snape said. His fingers touched his left forearm and then his neck. "I know for a fact that Draco Malfoy's Declaration of Betrothal arrived two days after the required filing date, yet his was approved."

"I found out that Lavender Brown's sister filed late as well," Hermione said. "But other than a mild rebuke, no action was taken against her, and her match was approved. She certainly didn't have a Declaration filed for her within minutes of missing the deadline as we supposedly did."

"You think there's some sort of plot against the two of you personally?" Filius asked.

"I can't come to any other conclusion," Snape replied.

"It would explain why my attempt to verify that you had, indeed, filed a Declaration was rebuffed in such a strong and threatening manner by the Special Coordinator."

Filius paused, his brow furrowed deeply in thought. A moment later, he spoke again. "Who's the Special Coordinator, by the way? I've just realised that there's no name or signature on any of the letters or forms we've received."

"I noticed that the first day," Snape said. "I asked Lupin, but even he didn't know. This in spite of the fact that it's on the Special Coordinator's orders that some witches and wizards have had their wands confiscated and their magic bound."

"He's tried to talk to Arthur, but he can't get through to him. Every time he questions something, he's referred back to the Special Coordinator. All requests for face to face meetings with the Special Coordinator have been denied. No one even knows if the person is a man or a woman. Who ever it is has been given a tremendous amount of power and has no accountability to anyone, apparently not even to the Minister for Magic himself."

"If only we'd been able to convince the Ministry that all we needed was a little more time to perfect the charms and potions we've been working on. We've made so much progress in the last few weeks. I'm sure the solution is close," Filius said.

"None of our communiqués regarding our research has even been acknowledged. The Ministry seems unwilling to even consider any option other than this insane new law," Snape said. "And while Hermione and I were prepared to comply with the requirement and marry, neither of us is willing to sacrifice ourselves to the likes of Mundungus Fletcher and Sybill Trelawney."

"It's a desperate scheme," Filius said. "If you're discovered missing over the next few days, the Ministry may send Aurors to track you down."

"Lupin has agreed to 'lose' any such requests that cross his desk," Snape said.

Filius laughed. "Ah ... how ironic it would be if the Ministry were to lose another important document!"

"If you're willing to help, Filius ..." Snape began.

"Of course I am!" Filius interrupted him. "What can I do?"

"Just keep up the pretence that the three of us are hard at work here, as usual. Answer anything urgent that is addressed to either of us, etcetera."

"Oh, I can do that!"

"Filius, do you think you could pop over to my flat and see to Crookshanks once or twice a day?" Hermione asked.

"Of course, of course. Or I could bring him here ..."

Hermione shook her head. "I'll get him settled here after we return from Cyprus. He doesn't like change much. He's older now and set in his ways."

"That sounds familiar," Filius said with a pointed look at Snape.

Snape scowled. "I'm in my prime, you old hobgoblin."

Filius laughed. "I notice you didn't deny being set in your ways."

"Why would I?" he said, and Filius laughed again.

"I've a way with animals, Hermione," Filius said as he turned back to Hermione. "I'll get him settled in for you."

"Thank you, Filius," Hermione said. "That'll be one less thing I have to deal with."

"How are you travelling?" Filius asked. "Did Remus get you a Portkey somehow?"

"We're flying," Snape said.

"It's well over three thousand kilometres from London to Cyprus! You can't fly a broom that far!"

"We're not flying brooms, you bloody dolt," Snape said. "We're taking an aeroplane. Even someone who's led the sheltered, wizarding life you have must know what an aeroplane is."

"Those Muggle contraptions with wings and an engine? They're heavier than air! I don't know how they can possibly stay up! Couldn't you take the train instead?"

"I've yet to hear of a train, Muggle or wizard, which could travel over the ocean. Cyprus is *anisland*. Besides, Muggles have their own kind of magic, Filius. It's called aerodynamics. It has to do with energy and lift ... never mind, you wouldn't understand."

Filius shook his head. "You're right I don't understand why you'd want to do something so dangerous." He shuddered as he spoke.

"It's no more dangerous than Apparating or flying a broom or taking a Portkey," Hermione said. "Probably less so as I've never heard of anyone on a Muggle aeroplane being splinched."

"If you say so," Filius replied, but he still looked sceptical.

"We have to leave now," Snape said as he glanced at his watch. "Our flight to Paphos leaves in two hours."

"You have the tickets, right?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I have the tickets," Snape said.

"And all the proper documentation?"

"Yes."

"And ..."

"I have it all," Snape said, cutting her off.

"Well, there's no need to get shirty," she said in an offended tone.

"I'm *always* shirty," Snape said. "You're just being over-sensitive."

Hermione considered that for a moment. "Maybe I have pre-wedding jitters," she said at last, not wanting to get into a row with him just minutes before they'd have to spend hours sitting next to each other on an aeroplane.

"If we don't get to Heathrow, there won't be a wedding to have jitters over," he said as he held out his hand.

"Let's go then." She tucked her hand into his.

"We'll see you on Monday, Filius," Snape said. "Thank you."

A moment later, they were gone.

Author's Note: This story was written for the Potter Place's Variety Challenge. This is the prompt I chose: Something Old Revisit a once popular challenge. I chose to revisit the Marriage Law Challenge, but I've placed the story in a post-DH timeline.

Four

Chapter 4 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Four

Snape and Hermione arrived in Paphos, Cyprus at three o'clock in the morning on Wednesday. They took a taxi to the hotel a small, no-frills establishment and checked into their rooms, thus beginning their three day residency requirement.

They spent Wednesday and Thursday seeing the sights of Paphos and the surrounding coastal areas. It was during this two day period of isolation and forced togetherness that Hermione discovered that when he was removed from the everyday stress of the wizarding world, Severus Snape was a different person. He was polite, personable, and attentive. They took a tour on a glass-bottom boat. They visited a local winery. They even went to the beach. Although neither of them had brought swim wear, they took off their shoes and stockings and walked along the pristine sand, allowing the crystal blue-green water to swirl over their feet. Hermione laughed when Snape scuttled away from a larger wave that threatened to dampen the cuff of his trousers. After a time, they sat side-by-side on a dune, allowing the warm, gentle breeze to dry their feet. They chatted together easily about the sights, the sounds, and the people of Cyprus. By silent, mutual agreement, they didn't speak of the crisis back in the wizarding world.

For the first time in all the years Hermione had known him, first as her teacher and then as a colleague, Snape seemed relaxed, almost content. She noticed that his perpetual scowl was mostly absent, and he smiled more readily. Even his nervous gesture of touching or rubbing his forearm and neck, which had developed after his encounter with Nagini, had diminished. (Although Hermione was sure Severus would have denied he possessed a nervous gesture, which he would have perceived as a sign of weakness.)

On one outing, Snape took Hermione's hand to guide her over a rough patch of cobbled stone, but when they were once again on smooth pavement, he didn't release her hand. Instead, he curled his fingers around hers and squeezed her hand softly. Hermione smiled up at him and returned the gentle pressure.

Anyone looking at them as they walked the ancient streets might have mistaken them for a couple on their honeymoon.

They ate dinner each evening at a nearby open-air café and then walked back to the hotel hand-in-hand.

And each evening before he walked away and left her standing outside the door to her room, he would lean down and kiss her.

The first kiss was halting, as though he expected her to slap his face or at least push him away. Instead, she reached up and held his head in place as she opened her lips slightly, inviting him to explore her mouth further.

Their kisses, after that first one, left them both a bit breathless and edgy.

On Friday afternoon, they filed their paperwork at the Municipal Marriage Office, received their Special Licence, and finalised the arrangements for the civil ceremony, which would take place on Saturday evening.

They were passing through the shopping district on their way back to the hotel when Hermione pulled up suddenly.

"What is it, Hermione?" Snape asked.

"Would you mind if I ducked into this shop for a bit?" she asked.

Snape looked at the fripperies displayed in the window and frowned. "I'm not going in there," he said.

"I didn't ask you to go in. In fact, I'd prefer it if you didn't."

"What could you possibly want in there?"

Hermione coloured slightly. "Look, I know we'll probably be divorced before we make it to our first anniversary, but a woman only gets married for the first time once."

"And?"

"And I want a new dress, all right? Now, go away and let me shop for it!"

Snape was taken aback for a moment, but he recovered quickly. She was right; they probably would be divorced within a year or as soon as they perfected the charms and potions that would make their marriage unnecessary. But she was also right that a first marriage only happened once.

"Is two hours enough time?" he asked.

"An hour is enough time," Hermione said. "I'm not much of a shopper. And I don't want to make you wait for me."

"I'll return in two hours. We'll have dinner before we go back to the hotel."

"Okay," she said. She turned to open the door of the shop.

"Hermione," Snape said her name softly, and she turned back to him.

"Yes?"

"No bloody pink!"

Hermione laughed. "No pink, I promise."

She reached a hand out and stroked his cheek gently.

"Thank you, Severus."

He nodded a bit stiffly and then turned and left her staring after his retreating back.

It took Hermione nearly the entire two hours to find a dress. She tried on and rejected one after another. One was too short, another too frilly. The colour on one was too pale, the print on another too bold. She nearly gave up, thinking that she would simply transfigure the dress she'd brought with her. And then she spotted it. As soon as the filmy, gauzy dress with its swirls of the jewel-like blues and greens of the Mediterranean floated down over her body, she knew she'd found it.

The shop attendant carefully packed the dress in layers of tissue paper.

Impulsively, Hermione tossed a wispy pair of silk knickers, a bra, and a camisole, all in the same jewel tones as the dress, onto the counter.

"Excellent choices, miss. Your husband is a very lucky man."

"Oh, I'm not married," Hermione said hastily.

"You soon will be though, won't you?" the woman asked with a twinkle in her dark eyes.

"Does it show?"

The woman smiled knowingly. "I can always tell when a woman dresses for her man. But I learn more when I see what a woman chooses to wear when she ~~undresses~~ dresses for her man."

"I just don't want my underwear to show through the dress it is rather transparent."

"Of course, miss," the woman replied. But she was still smiling as she totalled up Hermione's purchases.

Hermione paid and gathered her parcels.

"Thank you, miss," the shop attendant said. And then she added a phrase in Greek.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said as she shook her head. "I don't understand."

The woman smiled again. "It is a blessing of sorts for your marriage. It means I wish you a long marriage filled with love, happiness, and passion," the woman said in English.

Hermione's eyes clouded for a moment as she realised how ineffably sad it made her to know that her marriage would have none of those elements. And then she shook her head slightly. If they were able to perfect their charms and potions, her marriage to Severus would be over almost before it began. But while they might not have love, happiness, or passion, she knew that no matter how short her marriage, there would be respect and contentment. And if the kisses they'd shared so far were any indication, there would be a good, healthy dose of lust, as well. It was less than she would have expected if her marriage was taking place for all the right reasons, but it was much, much more than she'd ever have shared with Mundungus Fletcher.

She smiled at the woman. "Thank you ... I wish it, too."

Hermione stepped out of the shop and saw Snape striding toward her.

"I see you've accomplished your mission," he said as he reached to take the parcel from her hand.

"I've got it," she said. She twitched the bundle out of his reach. "It's supposed to be bad luck for the groom to see the bride's dress before the wedding."

Snape arched a brow at her. "I'm merely being polite. I'm hardly going to tear open the package to ogle your frock."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," she replied smoothly. "But I'll carry it anyway."

"It isn't pink, is it?" he growled.

Hermione couldn't resist. "As pink as bubble gum and candy floss," she said with well-hidden amusement and watched as he visibly paled.

"You didn't ..."

"No, I didn't," she said as the smile she'd been hiding finally broke across her face. "But that's all I'm going to tell you about it." She reached out and grasped his hand. "Come on, I'm famished. Let's go have our last supper as singles."

"'Last Supper' has a rather ominous connotation, doesn't it?" Snape remarked as he allowed her to lead him away from the shop and towards the café.

Hermione sighed over-dramatically. "Oh, yes ... marriage will be a heavy cross to bear."

Snape wasn't sure why he continued the ridiculous exchange, but he did. "Well, we could always wash our hands of the entire situation," he said and waited for Hermione's riposte.

"We could, I suppose," she said with her face composed into a look of studied innocence, "but then you'd lose your opportunity to nail me."

Snape was still laughing when they arrived at the café.

After their dinner, they walked back to the hotel. As he'd done on the previous two nights of their stay, Snape kissed her outside her door.

"Make sure your bag is packed before we leave for the Marriage Office tomorrow," Snape said as he lifted his lips from hers one last time.

"Tomorrow? I thought our flight back to London wasn't until Sunday afternoon."

"It's not, but I've arranged another hotel for tomorrow night."

"Oh, I just thought we'd stay here." She waved her hand toward her closed door.

Snape just stared at her pointedly.

"Or in your room, if you'd rather," she added.

"Unless your room is markedly larger than mine, I doubt that two people of normal proportions can move around comfortably in it. As for the bed ... you do realise that we'll be *sharing* a bed don't you?"

"Well, of course I do."

"It's a very small bed, Hermione. I thought you'd appreciate some place with a bit more ... space."

"Yes, well, it's just for one night ..." Her voice trailed off.

"A very important night," he said quietly.

"It's very kind of you," she said. "Thank you."

Snape cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable with being thought of as kind.

"It's nothing, really. I don't relish being squashed into a room barely bigger than a water closet."

"Of course," she said with a smile. "I'll see you at breakfast, then."

"I thought there was some sort of taboo about seeing the bride before the wedding."

"That's just a silly Muggle superstition. Besides, we can hardly sit in our rooms avoiding each other for the entire day, can we?"

"No, I suppose not," Snape said.

"Goodnight, Severus," she said. She turned and slid her key into the lock.

The door opened, but before she could step inside, Snape touched her shoulder and turned her back toward him.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her again. He wrapped his arms around her and moulded her body against his.

When he broke the kiss, he put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up.

"I'll think of a solution for tomorrow," he said.

"What?" Her head was still a bit muzzy.

"So you can keep the dress a secret."

"It doesn't matter," she said as she swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat.

He tilted his head and looked at her shrewdly. "It matters."

She nodded, not sure she could trust her voice again.

"Goodnight, Hermione." He pushed her gently through the open door of her room and closed the door behind her.

"Do you have anything special you need to do today?" Snape asked as he pushed the remnants of his breakfast away.

"I thought I'd get married. Most people think that's rather special," she replied dryly.

"That's this evening. I meant this morning and this afternoon. Don't women have their hair done or get manicures for events such as will occur this evening?"

Hermione smiled. "Sometimes. But I believe we established that I do my own hair, and I've never had a manicure in my life."

"How much time will you need to get ready, then?"

"Not very long. What do you have planned for the day?"

"The ceremony is scheduled for seven o'clock. I thought I'd take a taxi to the Marriage Office around six. Once I arrive, I'll send the taxi back to fetch you. Your dress will thus be safe from my prying eyes before the wedding."

"It's barely ten o'clock," Hermione said. "What will we do until it's time to get ready?"

"I was actually hoping you *would* have some primping to do," Snape said. "I have an old friend, a very distant cousin, actually, who lives near Coral Bay. We're to meet early this afternoon. He's going to take me to a potions supplier in Peyia who claims to have some rare ingredients I've been looking for. We'll probably have lunch there."

"In that case, I suppose I could force myself to sit through a manicure. I'd also like to get Filius a little thank you gift for taking care of Crookshanks. And there are some interesting shops I didn't get to explore. I saw some lovely earthenware jars that could be used to store some of your ingredients. And ..."

"Enough," Snape said as he held up his hand to halt her chatter. "I can see you'll have no problem filling your day."

"No, I guess not," Hermione agreed.

He stood and tossed some money on the table to pay for their breakfast. "I'll be on my way, then. I'll see you at the Marriage Office around six forty-five."

"Do I have to check out of the hotel when I leave?"

"I'll see to everything, including getting your luggage to our new hotel before we arrive there after dinner tonight."

"Thanks," she said as she got to her feet and picked up her handbag. She looked up at him.

Snape resisted the urge to kiss her, thinking that perhaps there was some further superstition regarding contact between them at this point. He reasoned that their marriage was getting off to a shaky enough start without inviting the Fates to conspire against them.

Hermione's eyes remained locked on his as she fiddled with the clasp of her handbag, opening it and snapping it shut again.

"Well, then, I hope you enjoy your day, Severus," she finally said, breaking eye contact.

Before he could think about it any further, he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

"And you, yours," he said as he straightened.

And then he strode away.

Although he hadn't lied to her he really was meeting his friend in Coral Bay he hadn't told her everything about his plans.

He made his way to the taxi stand in the harbour district and arranged to hire a car and driver for the day. The driver, who introduced himself as Stefanos, was happy to have a guaranteed fare for the entire day and pointed out the sights as he drove, speaking in accented, but easily understood English.

Snape's first stop was the hotel where they were currently staying. He settled the charges for both rooms and arranged to have their luggage delivered to their new hotel while they were having dinner. His next stop was the new hotel. He checked them in, his hand actually shaking a bit as he filled in the registration form as Mr. and Mrs. Severus Snape. He advised the clerk that their bags would be delivered in the early evening, and that he and his wife would be arriving after dinner. The clerk asked few questions as he listened to Snape.

He then had the driver take him to Coral Bay. He could have Apparated there much quicker, but he'd need the taxi for later anyway.

Snape made several stops in Coral Bay, relying on Stefanos to guide him to the places he needed to go.

"This is the best place for what you want," Stefanos said as he pulled over to the kerb. "My cousin owns the place. I'll talk to him for you, get you the best deal."

"Thank you, Stefanos," Snape replied earnestly. "I'm afraid I've no experience in this area, and I appreciate your input."

It only took a few minutes to decide what he wanted.

"I need two hours, sir," Spiro said as Snape handed over payment.

"I'll be busy for at least that long," Snape said. "What time do you close?"

"Oh, I live upstairs. If you come after six o'clock, just ring the bell," Spiro said.

"I'll be here long before that."

"Unless you forget," Spiro said with a chuckle.

"Yes, unless I forget." Snape agreed with a smile.

"I think you will not forget, sir," Stefanos said cheerfully as they left the shop.

"I doubt I will, but if I do, I'll count on you to remind me."

"Of course, sir."

Snape left the store satisfied that Stefanos and his cousin Spiro hadn't taken advantage of his ignorance.

It was just past noon when the taxi pulled up in front of a modest home a few blocks from the beach.

"Go have some lunch," Snape said as he stepped out of the taxi. He handed a few notes through the window, but Stefanos waved them off.

"You pay me good already, sir. No need to buy me food. When should I come back to get you?"

"My friend and I are going to Peyia, but he has a car. We'll probably have lunch there. Can you be back here in three hours?"

"Three hours yes, sir."

Snape watched the taxi drive off, and then he walked up the stepping stones that led from the road to the white-painted front door.

"Severus! How are you, you mangy dog?" The slap on the back nearly knocked Snape to his knees, but he hung on to his dignity and refused to buckle.

"Martin, good to see you," Snape said. He could feel the bones in his hand beginning to grind together under the pressure of his old friend's handshake. Seeing such spryness and energy in a man nearly a hundred years old gave Snape great hope about enjoying a robust old age himself.

"What brings you to Cyprus?" Martin asked.

"It's a long story," Snape replied.

"We'll talk while we drive to Peyia."

A few minutes later they were in Martin's tiny car heading away from Coral Bay toward Peyia.

"Now, what's going on?"

"I'm sure you've heard about the problem with the declining birth rate in wizarding Britain," Snape said.

"Yes, I have, and I've also heard about the drastic measure the Wizengamot took in an attempt to solve it," Martin said as he manoeuvred, in a seemingly suicidal manner, around a slower moving vehicle. "Are you planning to settle here then, rather than marry?"

Snape checked that his seat belt was securely fastened before he replied. "No, actually, I am getting married this evening, as a matter of fact."

"Why here? Why didn't you just get married in England?"

"Because I'm not marrying the witch the Ministry chose for me."

"I see. Do you need a witness?"

"We're having a civil ceremony at the Municipal Marriage Office in Paphos."

"Will the Wizengamot recognise it?"

"They always have in the past," Snape said. His fingers made their habitual journey from forearm to neck.

"Times are different now, *cousin*," Martin said. "If you have a magical witness, especially a relative, no matter how distant, there can be no doubt about the legal status of the marriage."

Snape was thoughtful. "You might have to return to England if ..."

"I'm an expatriate by choice, not by necessity. I'm not dodging taxes or trying to escape prosecution for a crime. I'd travel back to London if need be."

"I appreciate that, Martin, and I'm sure Hermione will, as well."

"Hermione? Hermione *Granger*?"

"You know her?" Snape asked with a note of surprise.

"Not personally, but even here, in this backwater of the wizarding world, we've heard of her. Her papers about the effects of the toxic magic left behind after the Dark Lord's defeat are well-known. Not to mention she's a bloody war hero! How did you manage to convince her to marry an old curmudgeon like you?"

"I'm a bloody war hero, you arse, or have you forgotten?" Snape said sourly. "And I hardly think you're in a position to call me old."

"What I lack in youth, I make up for in charm and personality," Martin said. "Ask any of my lady birds. And you haven't told me how you convinced her to marry you. You didn't slip her a love potion, did you?"

Snape's brows drew together, but before he could speak, Martin started to laugh.

"Now who's an arse? See? Charm, personality, and a well-developed sense of humour all qualities you seemingly lack."

Snape snorted softly.

"Well?" Martin persisted.

"We've been working together for several years, you know. We're not strangers."

"And the spouses chosen for you by the Ministry were?"

"Not strangers, no, but they were totally unacceptable to both of us. And we had actually filed a Declaration of Betrothal. The Ministry claims it was 'lost' and refused to accept a new one."

"So you're thumbing your noses at the Ministry and the Wizengamot? Very brave."

"In a few weeks, a few months at most, we'll have found a solution to the falling birth rate, and the new law will no longer be necessary. Hermione and I will divorce and be able to go on with our lives without further complications."

"You haven't even married yet, and you're already talking about divorce?"

"It's a marriage of convenience, Martin. Or as another colleague put it, a case of better the devil you know. Neither of us has any lofty expectations."

Snape turned his head to stare out the side window of the car, his fingers absently rubbing at his neck.

Martin considered Severus's words as he drove. Every so often, he glanced out of the corner of his eye to observe his old friend. Severus had casually dismissed any emotional motivation for his up-coming marriage, but his body language told another story. Martin was looking forward to meeting Hermione Granger and discovering exactly what her own expectations were regarding her 'convenient' marriage.

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Five

Chapter 5 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Five

The drive to Peyia wasn't long, and soon they were entering the town proper. Martin drove up and down the busy main street trying to find a parking spot.

"We passed the car park three times," Snape said.

"I don't pay for parking on principle," Martin grumbled. "The blood-sucking bureaucrats in charge of this island are always trying to find ways to get more money from the over-burdened citizenry!"

"I'll pay for the fucking parking, Martin," Snape said, "and you can continue your civic protest after I'm gone. I haven't got all bloody day, you know."

Thus mollified, Martin entered the Municipal car park. He found a space near the exit.

"This spot's for motorbikes only," Snape said as he pointed to the sign. "Besides, you'll never fit into it."

"Any Muggles around?" Martin asked as he slipped his wand from his sleeve.

Snape glanced around, but at the moment, the area they were in was empty of both vehicles and pedestrians.

"No."

"Good." Martin flicked his wand, and the little car slid sideways into the parking spot with less than an inch between his car and the ones he'd parked between. He wriggled out of the driver's seat and flicked his wand at the offending sign. "I'll lift the Invisibility Charm from it when we leave. I can't afford another ticket!"

They walked down the street and Martin led them into a small taverna.

A bronze bell over the door tinkled as they entered. A tall, stately looking woman in a flowing toga-like robe glided from her spot behind the wooden counter and approached them with her arms extended widely.

"Martin! It's been too long." She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him warmly. Then she kissed his cheeks soundly and finished with a smacking kiss on his lips.

"Arethusa, love, I was here two weeks ago," Martin said as he returned her enthusiastic greeting.

"Too long!" Arethusa insisted. "But I'll forgive you if you introduce me to your companion." She cast a speculative look at Snape, her eyes openly appraising him.

"Leave him alone, Arethusa," Martin said with a chuckle. "His name is Severus Snape. He's an old friend and a very distant cousin. And he's to be married this evening."

She sighed. "What a pity. But if you'll leave him with me for an hour or so, I might convince him to change his mind." She lifted her hand to Snape's shoulder and let it drift down his arm caressingly.

"Forgive her, Severus," Martin said. "She claims to be descended from the Sirens and fancies herself irresistible."

"It's a good thing I don't believe in myths, then, isn't it?" Snape said as he gently brushed her hand away.

Arethusa gave a soft trilling laugh. "If I can't seduce you, can I offer you lunch? The lamb stew is freshly-made."

"We need to go through," Martin said, "but we'll be back in a couple of hours. Save some of the stew for us, would you?"

"Of course I will," she said with a smile. "Follow me."

She led them down a short hallway toward the back of the taverna. There were three doors at the end of the hallway, two of them obviously the men's and women's toilets. The third had a sign that read, 'Employees only' in both Greek and English.

She used a key to open this door. She flicked on the light switch and then gestured them inside.

"Enjoy your visit, Severus."

"Thank you."

She closed the door, leaving Martin and Severus inside the small room. Snape heard the lock snick as the key turned.

Martin turned toward the back wall of the room, which appeared to be a janitor's cupboard. He waved his wand over the wall, and another small door appeared. He opened the door, and sunlight spilled into the cupboard.

He stepped through, and Snape followed him. The wall behind them reformed, although the outline of the door remained.

"Welcome to Calypso Court, Severus," Martin said. "It's not as grand as Diagon Alley, but it serves the needs of those witches and wizards who chose to live on Cyprus."

Snape looked around. Although not nearly as crowded as Diagon Alley, even on a quiet day, there were still a number of people about. Some carried string bags; others were looking into shop windows.

"I didn't realise there were so many magical folk living here."

"We've had a bit of a bump in the population in the last several years many people left Britain when it became obvious that there would be the trouble with the Dark Lord again. We've also had a few join us over the last year or so for reasons I'm sure you're aware of. Come on, I'll give you the fifty Knut tour."

As they walked down the narrow street, Martin nodded politely to a few people, but he didn't stop to introduce Snape to anyone.

"There's no regular owl post on the island, of course, as it would attract too much attention from the Muggles, but you can send and receive messages and smaller packages from Hermes Owl Service." Martin pointed to a shop on his right.

"There isn't really a wizarding community, as such; most of us live and work among the Muggles. We don't need robes too often, but Madam Malkin keeps a few on hand here." He pointed to the left this time.

"Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour ... so this is where he went," Snape said as they skirted a couple of small metal tables and matching chairs placed in front of a shop with an elaborately painted window.

"Right-o. The good guys thought the bad guys had got to him, and the bad guys kept looking for him thinking that if he'd run off, he must have something they were looking for. Turns out all he was protecting was the recipe for the best ice cream in the world. To hear him tell it, he was just about ready to retire anyway."

They walked in silence for a few moments.

"Gringotts has a branch here?" Snape asked with a note of surprise as he spotted another familiar sign.

"Of course they do. Only two goblins assigned here, and it must be shite-duty as most of them work only a few weeks, and then you never see them again, but you can access your account from here if you need to. The goblins can also arrange for *emergency transportation* for a fee, of course."

"Illegal Portkeys?" Snape asked with interest.

Martin shrugged. "Goblins have their own magic; sometimes it's better not to know too much."

Snape nodded.

"But here's the place you're interested in," Martin said as they came to the last shop on the street. It was much larger than the others, the front windows crammed with bottles, jars, and boxes in a myriad of sizes, shapes, and colours.

"This is Hecate's. If you can't find what you're looking for here, it doesn't exist."

Martin pulled the door open, and they walked in.

A man was bent over, apparently scooping something out from the bottom of a wooden barrel. His head and shoulders were actually inside the barrel, and his round, fleshy bottom was pointed up into the air. The man mumbled something, but whatever he said was lost in the depths of the barrel.

A moment later, he straightened. As his head emerged from the barrel, he shook it, and a cloud of fine, white powder flew up around him.

"I see you're still talking out of your arse, Philip," Martin said as he waved his hand, fanning away the chalk-like dust.

"Bugger off," the man answered as he brushed at his clothing, dislodging more of the powder.

"Oh, and as quick as ever!"

"Not as quick as you, if Melinda Tomai is to be believed."

"You know she lies didn't she tell you that you were a better lover than I?"

Martin started to laugh, and a moment later, the rotund little man joined in.

It was obvious that the two of them were friends of long standing.

"Philip, I'd like you to meet Severus Snape. He's the one I told you about; he's looking for some of your more esoteric items."

"Severus, this is Philip Murcuris, the finest purveyor of potions on all of Cyprus."

Philip sent a mocking glare Martin's way. "As usual, I'm completely underwhelmed by your praise as I'm the *only* purveyor of potions on Cyprus." He then turned to Snape. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Snape."

"Severus, please," Snape said as he held out a hand.

Philip wiped his hand down the side of his robes before he took Snape's. "Philip. And while I'm pleased to meet you, I certainly hope you're not planning to set up shop on the island. There really isn't enough business to support two of us."

"The poor sod came to Cyprus to get married," Martin said before Snape could speak.

"You and your bride will be returning to England?" Philip asked in a hopeful tone.

"Tomorrow, actually," Snape replied.

Philip smiled. "How can I help you, Severus?"

Again, Martin spoke before Snape could. "I'm going to leave you two and tend to a few errands of my own. It stinks in here."

Philip took a deep sniff. "I don't smell anything." He turned to Snape. "Do you smell anything?"

Snape's nostrils flared a bit. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

Martin shook his head. "Potioneers," he muttered. Then louder he said, "I'll be back in an hour or so. Care to join us for lunch Philip? Arethusa has lamb stew today."

"I suppose I can close up for a little while; it's not too busy today."

Snape spent the next hour sniffing, testing, and occasionally tasting various ingredients. Philip was a shrewd business man. He knew the value of the ingredients and that they were difficult to obtain. He named a price that was just above what Snape had expected to pay. Snape also knew the value of the ingredients and was every bit as shrewd as Philip. He knew that there were few buyers for such rare ingredients and that the longer they sat unsold, the less they were worth. Snape made a counter-offer that was just below his target price. After a few volleys back and forth, they finally agreed on a price that was right in the middle. They shook hands to seal the bargain, each of them believing he had got the best end of the deal.

They'd just finished making arrangements for the items to be delivered to Spinner's End when Martin returned.

Philip flipped the sign on the door to "Closed", and the three of them walked down the street toward the door that led back to Arethusa's taverna and the lamb stew that awaited them there.

It was nearly three o'clock when Snape and Martin returned to Martin's house. Stefanos was already there; he was leaning against the rear fender of his taxi, smoking while he waited.

"I'll see you at the Marriage Office," Martin said as Snape climbed out of the car.

"The ceremony is at seven o'clock," Snape said, "but you might want to arrive a few minutes early to meet Hermione. I won't be able to introduce you, however, as I'm strictly forbidden to see her beforehand."

Martin laughed. "Don't worry, Severus. I'll introduce myself to your unsuspecting bride."

"Thank you again, Martin," Snape said sincerely.

Martin waved a hand airily. "It's nothing, old friend. I'll see you tonight."

Snape nodded and then strode over to Stefanos.

"Have you been waiting long?" Snape asked.

"Oh, no, sir, no sir," Stefanos said. He dropped his cigarette and crushed it under his shoe as he opened the door for Snape.

Once Snape was settled in the back seat, Stefanos hurried around the taxi and climbed behind the wheel.

"Did you enjoy your lunch, sir?" Stefanos asked as he started the taxi and shifted into gear.

"Yes, I did, thank you. And you?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I have family here in Coral Bay, so this was a good chance to visit. My cousin Melina gave me some baklava. He held up a large brown bag. "Would you like a piece?"

"No, thank you. I enjoyed a rather filling lamb stew for lunch." He patted his stomach.

"You went to Arethusa's place?" Stefanos asked.

Snape studied Stefanos's eyes in the mirror. He hadn't detected any hint of magical emanations from the young man.

"You know Arethusa?" Snape asked carefully. His fingers brushed against the sleeve of his jacket and then over the side of his neck.

"Everyone knows her," Stefanos said. "Her lamb stew is the best on the island. Her baklava is good, but my cousin makes the best baklava on Cyprus."

"I'm afraid I had no room for baklava," Snape said. His restless hand settled back on his lap.

"That's too bad. But maybe next time, yes?"

"I'll make sure of it."

A few minutes later, they were back in Coral Bay. Stefanos pulled up outside his cousin's store, and Snape hurried inside. He was back out in just a few minutes, a small package in his hands. He tucked it into his pocket as he got back into the taxi.

"I'm ready to go back to the hotel now," Snape said.

"Yes, sir," Stefanos said.

They pulled up in front of the hotel, and Snape was about to open the door and climb out when a thought occurred to him.

"Stefanos, I need another small favour."

"Yes, sir?"

"I need to get a note to my ... to Miss Granger, but she's a bit superstitious and doesn't want me to see her before the wedding. I could try to slip it under her door, but if she hasn't returned to her room yet, I may run into her in the hall or the lift."

"Women sometimes they are crazy, yes?" Stefanos said with a smile. "You stay here, sir. I'll give the note to my cousin and ask him to deliver it he's the desk clerk, you know."

"Are you related to everyone on Cyprus?" Snape asked with an arched brow as he held out the sealed envelope.

Stefanos shrugged. "It's a small island."

He took the envelope and jumped out of the taxi.

Five minutes later, he was back. He leaned into the open window of the back seat where Snape sat.

"Your lady has just returned to her room, sir. Christos gave her the note you left and told her I would be here to pick her up at six-thirty. She said she would be ready. Christos also said that the things you bought in Coral Bay have been delivered to your room."

"Then I'd best go in and get ready myself," Snape said. "Please be back here at six o'clock to pick me up."

"Oh, yes, sir, I'll be here." He opened the back door of the taxi. Snape got out and walked into the hotel.

Although he'd been told that Hermione was already in her room, Snape made a point of hurrying out of the lift and past her door to enter his own room.

He shaved carefully and then brushed his teeth. The lamb stew had been delicious, but Arethusa had a heavy hand with the garlic. He showered and shampooed his hair twice to make sure it was as clean and oil-free as he could get it. After drying himself off, he combed his hair and tied it back with a narrow band. He'd tried wearing his hair shorter, but it was so fine, straight, and limp that tying it back was the only way to keep it presentable.

He pulled on clean pants and socks and then unzipped the plastic bag that held the new suit he'd bought. He had intended to wear the only Muggle suit he owned, an old-fashioned black wool thing that he'd had for more than a decade, but when Hermione had insisted on a new dress, he'd realised how shabby the old suit was.

The tailor in Coral Bay had done a fine job on very short notice. The navy blue suit fit well, and the pale blue shirt was an interesting contrast. Snape couldn't remember ever owning a shirt this colour. He tied his shoes and then slipped the blue and green striped silk tie around his collar. He knotted it carefully, making sure his collar covered the scar on his neck, and then stepped back to see the overall look in the mirror on the bathroom door.

Well, he'd never win any beauty contests, he acknowledged to himself ruefully, but at least Hermione wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen with him.

Snape slid his watch on his wrist, noting that it was five-thirty. Stefanos would be here to pick him up in half an hour. And in just a little over ninety minutes, he would be a married man.

He finished packing his suitcase, making sure he got his shaving kit and toiletries from the bathroom. He paced the room a bit, opening drawers to make sure he hadn't left anything behind. He looked at his watch again. Five-forty-five. He dug his toothbrush out of his bag and brushed his teeth again. He was sure he could still taste the garlic from the lamb stew he'd eaten more than three hours earlier.

He paced some more and wondered if Hermione was as nervous as he was.

At two minutes before six, he looked around the room one last time. He patted his pockets to make sure he had his wallet, a handkerchief, and the small package he'd picked up that afternoon. He tucked the Special Licence into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, slid his wand into the special pocket he'd transfigured into the inside of his sleeve, and left the room for the last time.

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Six

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Six

Hermione watched as Severus walked away from the table where the remnants of their breakfast sat. She saw him turn toward the harbour district. He'd said he was going to hire a taxi, probably for the entire day. He'd offered to hire one for her as well, but the shopping district was just a short walk from the hotel, and a taxi wasn't really necessary. They could have walked to the Municipal Marriage Office for the ceremony, just as they had to obtain their Special Licence, but she was glad she wouldn't have to. She had been surprised and rather touched by his solution, which would allow her to have her small Muggle superstition.

Hermione smiled as she thought of the dress she'd bought. It was the prettiest dress she'd ever owned. She only wished her mum could have been here to see her in it. She'd thought about having her parents meet them here, but she knew they'd never understand what she was doing. Since it was unlikely that she and Severus would remain married for very long, it was probably better that her parents didn't know.

If she ever had a real wedding, she'd make sure her mum helped her pick out a dress, and that her dad walked her down the aisle.

She shook her head a bit sadly. She was nearly thirty years old, and she hadn't had a date in more than three years. Even after she and Severus were divorced, it was highly unlikely that she'd marry again. Although this might not be the wedding of her dreams, it was probably the only one she'd ever have. Actually, she wasn't sure she'd ever imagined what her 'dream wedding' would be like. She shook her head again, and then she smiled. Well, in that case, what was to say that *this* wedding, the wedding that would take place in less than nine hours, couldn't be her 'dream wedding'?

"Lots to do, Hermione," she muttered to herself and set off toward the shopping district.

Hermione made quick work of buying a small gift for Filius. She also purchased several of the beautiful earthenware urns she'd told Severus about and made arrangements for them to be shipped to London. She forewent the other shops, however, and headed instead to a day spa housed in one of the fancier hotels near the beach.

Luckily, it wasn't prime tourist time on Cyprus. The spa wasn't busy, and the clerk was able to book services for her as a walk-in client.

She not only had a manicure and a pedicure, but also allowed the beauty technician to talk her into a facial and a full-body seaweed wrap after she was assured that her skin would 'glow with vibrant health' once the wrap came off. She reasoned that a woman could always use a healthy, vibrant glow especially on her wedding night.

She sipped mineral water and nibbled at the small finger sandwiches that were served in the early afternoon. She had her legs and her eyebrows waxed, but declined the offer of a bikini wax. It would have taken a well-cast Imperius to persuade her to go along with that suggestion.

She was then ensconced in an environmental chamber called The Rain Forest Retreat. She listened to water dripping, thunder rolling in the distance, and the muted trills of birdsong while a soft, warm 'breeze' swirled scented mists around her. She recognised jasmine, plumeria, and lilac in the floral notes and sandalwood, cedar, and pine in the woodsy tones. After a few minutes she gave in to the soporific effects of the warmth, the sounds, and the scents and fell into a drowsy state of half-sleep.

Hermione was awakened by a gentle tap on her shoulder. She blinked and sat up, slightly disoriented as she tried to remember where she was and why she was sitting in the middle of the jungle wearing nothing but a towel.

"The Retreat is very relaxing, yes?" the technician said.

"What? Oh, yes, yes," Hermione said as memory flooded back. The spa, the beauty treatments, the wedding the wedding!

"Bloody hell!" Hermione exclaimed as she jumped off the padded table she'd been resting on.

"Is there a problem, miss?" the technician asked anxiously. She was twisting her hands together nervously.

Hermione grabbed the technician's arm. "What time is it?" she demanded.

It had been just past one when she'd entered the room, and she had no idea how long she'd slept.

"It's two o'clock, miss," the technician said.

"Oh, thank goodness! I have to leave. I'm getting married in five hours and I've got to do something with my hair." She lifted a hand to her head. The humidity in the room had caused her hair to curl and frizz. She hoped she had enough Sleekeazy's Hair Potion with her to straighten it out.

"We have a hairdresser on staff, miss. I'm sure she'll be happy to style your hair for you."

Hermione's first inclination was to refuse. Her hair was a disaster; it always had been, but she was used to dealing with it. She really did know a number of hairdressing charms.

"Really, miss, she's very good. And we have a make-up specialist available as well. In less than three hours they can have you ready. All you'll have to do is put on your wedding gown."

"It's not a gown, really," Hermione said.

"It's lovely, I'm sure," the woman said. "And you shouldn't have to fuss with your hair yourself today of all days. It would be the completion of your perfect day of beauty."

Hermione considered that, and then she nodded.

"You're right. Let's go all the way!"

"Very good, miss. Follow me. I'll get you settled in the hairdressing suite, and then I'll send Adriana in immediately to get started."

"Your hair is very thick," Adriana said ten minutes later as she pulled a wide-toothed comb through Hermione's freshly-washed hair.

"Thick and bushy and frizzy."

"Thick and healthy and beautiful. Many women would wish to have hair this lovely."

"Not me. I've been fighting it my whole life."

"If you will pardon my saying so, miss, but that is where you make your mistake," Adriana said gently. "You must work with your hair, not fight against it."

"How?" Hermione asked. She was intrigued by the idea that someone thought her hair was beautiful.

"I'll show you how to do an everyday style, but then I will do something more dramatic for your wedding," Adriana said.

Two-and-a-half hours later, Hermione was staring into the mirror, looking at a stranger. Adriana had pulled her hair back off her face, fastening it in a braided coronet atop her head. After asking Hermione what colour her dress was, she had threaded blue and green ribbons through it. The ribbon ends were curled and framed her face along with several corkscrew coils of hair. It was elegant and completely different from anything she'd ever done with her hair before.

"It's beautiful, Adriana," Hermione said. "Thank you."

"You are very lovely, miss. Your groom will think you a vision. You will remember how to do the other style I showed you?"

"Yes, thank you. I can't believe I never thought to try it that way."

"That doesn't matter. You will do it now, yes?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said with a smile. She already had the necessary charms half formulated in her head.

"I will send Trina in to do your make-up now," Adriana said. "It has been my pleasure to make you beautiful. I wish you much happiness in your marriage."

"Thank you," Hermione replied.

The make-up actually took very little time. Trina gushed about Hermione's smooth, flawless skin and her well-shaped eyes and lips. It really had been a matter of a brush of colour across her cheek bones, a touch of sheer gloss on her lips, and a sweep of mascara on her naturally long lashes. Since she seldom bothered with make-up at all, Hermione had been glad not to have to deal with too much gunk on her face.

"You need only to enhance," Trina had insisted. "Too many women cover up their natural beauty with cosmetics."

With a final warning to use a nightly moisturiser, to stay out of the sun, and to never, ever smoke, Trina had left Hermione at the counter to settle her account.

Hermione cheerfully handed over what seemed like half her life savings and left the spa, a bag of samples, and an order form for more, clutched in her hand.

Hermione had only been in her room a few minutes when there was a knock at her door. She looked through the peephole and only opened the door after she recognised the desk clerk.

"Yes?"

"I have a message for you, Miss Granger," the man said as he held out an envelope.

"Thank you, Christos," she said, reading his name from the pin on his lapel.

She reached for her handbag, but before she could open it, Christos was waving her off.

"No, no, miss. My cousin, he is driving for Mr. Snape. He asked me to bring you this. It is my pleasure."

"Thank you again, then," she said with a smile.

He bowed slightly, and then he turned and strode back toward the lifts.

Hermione closed and locked the door before she looked at the envelope in her hand. She recognised Severus's spidery script, and for one heart-stopping moment she wondered if he was cancelling the wedding.

She immediately shook off that foolish thought. Severus was a man of honour. Even if he changed his mind, he would tell her to her face. He would never resort to the cliché of a 'Dear Jane' letter.

Perhaps it was a billet doux. And then she laughed out loud. That she would be receiving a love letter from Severus Snape was an even more foolish thought.

She tore the envelope open and pulled out the single sheet of paper.

Hermione,

My friend, whose name is Martin Gladstone, believes it would be a good idea for him to witness our marriage. After giving the matter some thought, I agree with him. He will meet you outside the Municipal Marriage Office when you arrive. While I was sure that the civil ceremony would be sufficient, Martin pointed out that having a relative witness the ceremony will make it impossible for the marriage to be challenged. I'm sorry that we won't have the opportunity to discuss this more fully, but if you agree with our assessment of the situation, please be prepared to sign a special copy of our Certificate of Marriage. If you are not comfortable with having Martin there, I will abide by your wishes, and we will fight for our civil marriage if and when a challenge is made.

Severus

Not a 'Dear Jane' letter, but certainly not a love letter, either.

Hermione read the note again. Severus was, apparently, at least a bit concerned that the Ministry might question the legality of their marriage. Under certain circumstances, the Wizengamot had the authority to annul a civil marriage. A marriage that was magically witnessed, while lacking the irrevocability of a formal binding, was more difficult to end. The only way it could be dissolved was if both parties agreed. His cousin Martin, who was obviously a wizard, would witness the marriage and their magical signatures, thus assuring the validity of their union. Severus wanted her to have her wand with her so that they could 'sign' a magical copy of their Certificate of Marriage. By reading between the lines, she understood that he was giving her a choice. The civil marriage would take place whether they signed the magical certificate or not, and he would fight the Ministry and/or the Wizengamot should they decide to challenge it. But he was also telling her that he was willing to enter into a marriage that would be more difficult for him to get out of since its dissolution would require her consent.

Hermione trusted Severus and his judgement. If he felt a wizarding marriage was needed, she wouldn't disagree with him.

She touched the gold bracelet on her wrist. She never went anywhere without her wand, even if it didn't much look like a wand at the moment. When the time came, she would be prepared to sign the magical document.

Hermione leaned into the mirror over the bathroom sink to check her hair and make-up one last time before she went downstairs to wait for the taxi that would take her to her wedding. While she'd never thought of herself as beautiful, or even pretty, she had to say that Adriana and Trina had done a remarkable job. She looked interesting, even a bit dramatic. With one last look and a wink at her reflection, Hermione decided that both her day, and her money, had been well-spent.

She walked back out into the room, her eyes sweeping it one last time to make sure she'd packed everything. She closed her suitcase and picked up her small, beaded bag. She was just reaching for the door knob when there was a knock.

She opened the door and smiled at the man standing there.

"Have you come for my luggage? It's all set."

The man smiled. "I've actually come for you, miss," he said. "I'm Stefanos. Your husband your almost-husband, that is sent me to bring you to the Marriage Office."

"What perfect timing; I was just about to go downstairs."

A few minutes later, Hermione was settling herself in the back seat of the taxi. Stefanos closed the door and scurried around the vehicle to climb behind the wheel. He started the car, but before he shifted into gear to pull away from the kerb, he turned in his seat to speak to Hermione.

"Mr. Severus asked me to give this to you," he said as he held out a small white box. "He said you should read the note first."

"Thank you," Hermione said with a smile as she took the box and the envelope. She opened the flap of the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper.

This note was very different from the one she'd received earlier.

Dear Hermione,

I thought you might like to have these because every woman should have flowers on her wedding day.

Yours,

Severus

Hermione carefully folded the note and put it into her bag. Then she opened the florist's box.

"Oh, my," she said with a sigh. She lifted the small bouquet from its nest of tissue and held it up. White roses, stephanotis, and lily of the valley surrounded a small, fragile-looking orchid. She held the bouquet to her face and sniffed at the roses. Their scent was much lighter and more delicate than that of the stephanotis and lily of the valley. The orchid had no scent, but it was beautiful.

"We are here, miss," Stefanos said from the front seat as he pulled over in front of the Municipal Marriage Office. "Are you ready to go inside?"

Hermione smiled. "Oh, yes, I'm ready." And she knew she really was ready to begin this new and very important phase of her life.

As she stepped out of the taxi, an older gentleman approached her.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes, and you must be Mr. Gladstone," Hermione said as she held out her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Martin smiled and then lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles lightly. "It's my distinct pleasure to meet you. And if you don't mind, we'll dispense with the formalities. After all, we're about to be related, however distantly. You shall call me Martin and I'll call you Hermione."

"Of course, Martin."

"I must say, Hermione," Martin said as he held her arm to guide her up the steps, "your photos don't do you justice. You're ... exquisite. If I were forty years younger, I might try to lure you away from Severus, the lucky bastard. But since I'm not forty years younger, I guess I'd better take you inside."

Hermione smiled. It was impossible not to be charmed by the man.

They entered the building, and Martin led her down a short hallway.

"Severus and the Marriage Officer are inside," Martin said. "My cousin has given me the honour of allowing me to witness your marriage, if that's acceptable to you."

"I'm grateful that you've agreed to ... assist us."

"Oh, well-mannered and perceptive as well as beautiful," Martin said with another charming smile. "Would you do me the further honour of allowing me to escort you in to meet your groom? Severus explained that your parents weren't able to attend the ceremony."

Hermione felt the absurd prick of tears behind her eyelids. She blinked them resolutely away before they could fall. "I'm the one honoured," she said a moment later.

Martin took her hand and tucked it under his elbow. He opened the door, and they walked through it together.

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Seven

Chapter 7 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Seven

Severus looked up when he heard the door open, and his breath hitched as he watched Martin lead Hermione down the short aisle toward him. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but any expectations paled compared to the reality of the woman walking beside his cousin.

His eyes followed her as she approached.

Martin was smiling broadly as he led Hermione toward the front of the room where Severus, the Marriage Officer, and the two hired witnesses awaited.

"I bring your bride, Severus," Martin said with so much pride no one would have guessed that he was a stranger who'd just met her and not her father.

"Thank you, old friend," Snape said, his eyes never leaving Hermione.

"She looks like a goddess, doesn't she a goddess just rising from the sea," Martin said. And Severus, staring at Hermione in her jewel-toned dress, could only nod.

The Marriage Officer cleared his throat. "Are we ready to begin?"

Snape pulled his eyes away from Hermione and turned to face the Marriage Officer. "Yes, I'm ready."

"And you, miss?" the official asked formally.

"Oh, yes," Hermione replied.

"Are you giving the bride away?" the Marriage Officer asked Martin.

"She is her own person," Martin replied, "she is not mine to give away."

Martin kissed Hermione on the cheek and stepped to Snape's other side so that he could witness the ceremony.

"I come of my own free will to marry this man," Hermione said in a clear, firm voice.

"And I come of my own free will to marry this woman," Snape said just as firmly.

"Please declare your intent to marry," the Marriage Office said.

Hermione and Snape each turned slightly so that they were facing each other.

"Hermione," Snape said in a formal tone as he held out his hand. "Will you marry me?"

Hermione placed her hand in his and smiled up at him. "Yes, Severus, I will marry you."

"Let us proceed," the Marriage Officer said.

The Marriage Officer looked at them. "Severus and Hermione, you are hereby informed that by your mutual consent, which you have just given publicly and formally in my presence and before these witnesses, you have accepted each other as your lawful spouses, and with the confirmation of this fact by your signatures, you are contracting a lawful marriage for all the purposes of civil law.

"You should further know that your marriage cannot be dissolved during your lifetimes except by the valid judgement of a court of civil law. If either of you, before the death of the other, contracts a marriage while this one remains undissolved you will be guilty of bigamy, and you will be liable to the consequences provided by the law. Do you understand?"

"I do," Snape said.

"I do," Hermione repeated.

"It is now time to speak your vows," the Marriage Officer said. "You will speak first, Severus."

Snape nodded and began to speak. "I call upon the persons here present to witness that I, Severus Snape, accept you, Hermione Granger as my lawful wife from this day forward. I vow to cherish you, to respect you, to be faithful to you, and to encourage you in all your endeavours. I promise to share our lives through the joyous times and the sorrowful times, through days filled with hope and through days filled with disappointment. I will stand by you whether we are wealthy or poor, whether we are healthy or ill. This I promise throughout the remainder of our lives until death separates us."

The Marriage Office turned to Hermione.

"You will make your promises, now."

Hermione's lower lip trembled a bit, but she smiled up at Severus and began to speak. "I call upon the persons here present to witness that I, Hermione Granger, accept you, Severus Snape as my lawful husband from this day forward. I promise to cherish you, to hold you in my highest esteem, to remain faithful to you, and to support you when you are discouraged. I vow that I will share your joys and your sorrows, your hopes and your disappointments whether we are wealthy or poor, in good health or ill. This I swear through the remainder of our days until death comes between us."

"As Marriage Officer, I say that from this moment, you, Severus, and you, Hermione, are husband and wife. You are joined together, by your free consent, in matrimony, and you owe each other love, fidelity, and respect for the rest of your lives. This marriage constitutes the fulfilment of your lives and links your destinies on days of sunshine or days of rain, in joy or in sorrow, in times of prosperity or of poverty, and in sickness or in health, for as long as you both live. Marriage should be a union of two equals. In unity there is strength to conquer whatever difficulties may lie ahead. Each of you has gifts, skills, and capabilities which are unique. You must work together and use your skills to complement one another. Together you can do what neither of you can do alone.

"As a final warning," the Marriage Officer said sternly as he looked from Snape to Hermione and back again, "I must add that both of you have the right and the obligation to provide for the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of any children you may have so that they may become responsible and productive citizens of the world."

He paused a moment to give emphasis to his words, and then he continued. "At this time, you may exchange rings, if you would like."

Hermione started to shake her head, but then she saw Severus reach into his pocket.

They'd never discussed rings, and since they weren't customary in the wizarding world, she hadn't thought that Severus would give her one. She was surprised and touched when he opened his hand to reveal two slim gold bands resting on his palm.

"Will you wear my ring, Hermione?" he asked in a quiet tone.

"Yes, if you'll wear mine," she replied.

He slipped the ring on her finger, and she felt it adjust itself to fit perfectly.

He handed her the matching band and she slid it on his finger. It, too, was a perfect fit.

The Marriage Officer turned to Severus. "You must now kiss your bride," he said with a smile.

Snape flushed slightly, but he leaned down and kissed Hermione briefly.

"I'm sure he'll do better later, Hermione," Martin said *sotto voce*.

There was moment of shocked silence, and then Hermione started to laugh. "I certainly hope so," she said.

"Now, you will sign the Marriage Certificate," said the Marriage Officer around a large smile. He led them to a small podium at the side of the room.

"Sign both copies," he said. "One is for you, and I will take the other to be filed."

Hermione and Snape signed their names to the documents. The two hired witnesses signed, and the Marriage Officer signed and affixed his seal to both copies. He handed one to Hermione and kept the other.

He held out his hand to Snape. "May I be the first to offer my congratulations," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Snape said as he shook the man's hand.

The Marriage Officer then turned to Hermione. "And I will be the first to kiss the bride not counting your new husband's feeble effort, of course."

He leaned toward Hermione with pursed lips, but in spite of his joke, he merely kissed her on the cheek.

The two witnesses shook Snape's hand and also kissed Hermione on the cheek.

"And now you may go and begin your lives together," the Marriage Officer said.

He bowed to them briefly, and then he and the two witnesses turned toward the exit.

Martin watched as the three Muggles left the room, and then he turned back to Snape and Hermione.

"Severus, Hermione, you must magically sign the Marriage Certificate," he said.

Hermione took her copy of the Marriage Certificate and placed it back on the podium. She slid her gold bracelet off her wrist and muttered an incantation. The bracelet obediently reformed itself into her vine wood wand, and she used it to trace her name on the Marriage Certificate.

Snape slid his wand out of his sleeve and did the same.

Martin used his wand to sign his name as witness to the marriage. As he put the final flourish on his signature, pale blue sparks burst from his wand to shower over the three of them. Martin looked a bit bemused, but then he smiled. He spoke an incantation, and the paper shimmered briefly, emitting a pale yellow light. A moment later, a second copy of the document appeared. Martin picked this one up, carefully folded it, and tucked it into his pocket.

"I'll retain this one for safekeeping," he said. "The Ministry seems to have a penchant for losing your paperwork, doesn't it?"

"Very foresighted of you, Martin," Snape said as slipped his wand back into his sleeve. "Thank you again."

"Yes, thank you, Martin," Hermione nodded. Her wand was once more a bracelet.

"It's been my pleasure, I assure you."

"Will you join us for dinner?" Snape asked.

"I would think you'd want to be alone with your bride," Martin said.

"I invited you to dinner not on the bloody honeymoon," Snape said, and Martin started to laugh.

"So you did and didn't! I'd be delighted."

Five minutes later, the three of them were back in Stefanos's taxi, and five minutes after that, they pulled up to the kerb outside the restaurant.

"Stefanos," Snape said as climbed out. "Why don't you join us for dinner?"

"Me?" Stefanos said. "I'm just the taxi driver."

"You were a good friend to me today. I couldn't have got everything done without your help."

"I would love to join you for dinner, sir, and toast you and your beautiful new bride, but my own bride, she is waiting for me at home."

"Go get her and come back," Snape insisted.

"You are sure?"

"Yes, Stefanos," Hermione said, seconding Snape's request. "We'd truly enjoy having you and your wife join us."

"Thank you, sir, miss ... madam, rather," Stefanos said with a smile. "I'm sure Ilyssa will be thrilled to be part of your wedding feast."

"Hurry and go get her," Hermione urged.

"My Ilyssa is not like most women she can be ready quickly! We will return in less than thirty minutes."

"We'll wait for you to order dinner," Snape said.

"Thank you, sir," Stefanos said.

Snape got to his feet and hurried over when he saw Stefanos standing in the doorway twenty minutes later. Hermione quickly followed him.

"Stefanos, thank you for coming," Snape said in a gracious tone.

"We thank you for inviting us," Stefanos replied. "This is my wife, Ilyssa."

"I'm happy to meet you, Ilyssa," Snape said. He could see why she didn't need much time to get ready she had a natural beauty that required little embellishment.

"I am honoured, sir," she said.

"You must call me Severus. And this is my wife, Hermione."

"We're so happy you could come," Hermione said as she stepped forward. She took the other woman's hand and drew her away.

"What a lovely dress," Hermione said. "I can't wear pink, but it's perfect on you."

"Thank you. Your dress is very beautiful," Ilyssa said. "The bold colours remind me of the sea."

"Doesn't it though? It's not a traditionally styled wedding dress, but as soon as I saw it, I knew it was perfect. It's the prettiest dress I've ever owned."

"A woman's wedding dress should be beautiful, yes?"

"Oh, yes. What did your wedding dress look like?"

Ilyssa's eyes lit up. "It was my mother's and her mother's before her ..."

Their voices faded as they walked to the table. Moments later, they were seated next to each other, their heads tilted close together as they chatted like old friends.

Snape was sure it was Martin's doing, or maybe it was Hermione's bouquet that gave it away, but the owner of the restaurant, a man named Ari, found out that Snape and Hermione had just got married, and he insisted that they perform the traditional handkerchief dance before he would serve them dinner.

Snape tried to demur, claiming he had little dancing experience in general and no experience at all with this dance in particular. The owner, however, refused to take no for an answer. Martin, of course, egged him on, and soon most of the other diners were also clapping and yelling, urging him and Hermione to come to the centre of the floor.

Hermione put a hand on his forearm and leaned over to whisper into his ear. "We'll never get our food unless we dance. And all I had for lunch was a watercress sandwich I'm starving!"

Snape thought about the hearty lamb stew he'd eaten for lunch. "Oh, very well," he said as he got to his feet. He held out a hand, and Hermione took it, rising gracefully to her feet.

Amid much applause and laughter, and even a number of thrown plates, they managed to stumble through a rudimentary rendition of the required dance.

With a final cry of, "Opa!" the owner signalled that the food should be brought out.

Barely managing to hang on to her manners, Hermione tucked in.

"A watercress sandwich?" Snape asked as he watched her bite off half of a stuffed grape leaf. "I didn't think anyone actually ate watercress sandwiches."

"Typical spa food," Hermione said after she'd swallowed.

"So that's how you spent your day."

"You didn't think I did all this on my own, did you?" Hermione asked with a smile. "You're going to be very disappointed if you think I'm always going to look this put together." She popped the other half of the grape leaf into her mouth.

Snape smiled and let his eyes wander over her. "You should remember that I've seen you exhausted, sick, and once, if I recall, extremely hung over. I know what you look like when you haven't spent the day at a spa."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I'd nearly forgotten that day. It was the morning after I discovered that Ron was cheating on me with soon-to-be wife number three." Another stuffed grape leaf disappeared into her mouth.

"You got drunk because Weasley broke your heart?" Snape asked incredulously.

Hermione shook her head and swallowed before she spoke. "No, I got drunk celebrating the fact that I finally had the guts to finish it with him for good, the tosser." She pushed the plate of grape leaves aside and tasted her moussaka.

"And yet he tried to win his way back into your good graces as recently as a year ago."

"Unsuccessfully," Hermione reminded him.

"Once word of our marriage gets out, Weasley won't bother you again."

"Ron never let a little thing like a wedding vow stop him."

"You and he were ... involved ... while he was married?"

"The wedding vow might not have stopped Ron, but it certainly stopped *me*," Hermione said sharply. "Ron and I had an on-again, off-again relationship for years, but it was never 'on' while he was married. I keep my promises."

"I keep mine as well," Snape assured her.

"I've no doubt of that," Hermione said.

Before Snape could comment further, Ari, the owner of the restaurant came to stand between them, draping an arm over each of their shoulders.

"And how is the happy couple? The food is good, yes?"

"The food is excellent," Hermione said. She reached for the yoghurt sauce.

"Wait until you taste the baklava! It is the best on Cyprus."

"That's not what Stefanos said," Snape said in an innocent tone.

"What?" The man's expression was thunderous. He lifted his eyes and glared at the unsuspecting taxi driver.

"He said his cousin had the best baklava on Cyprus."

Ari threw his head back and laughed. It was a deep, booming laugh that rolled up from his belly and spilled out of his mouth in a joyous bellow.

"Stefanos told you the truth, then! *I am* his cousin!"

"I could have sworn that Stefanos said his cousin's name was Melina."

"Melina is a second-cousin only."

"He *is* related to everyone on Cyprus," Snape muttered, and Ari laughed again.

"Her baklava is good, I admit, but you will have my baklava with a glass of the finest ouzo available, and you will see that mine is far superior to hers," Ari said. He clapped

his hands, and a waiter hurried over.

"Ouzo and baklava for everyone at the table!"

Hermione nibbled at the sweet, flaky baklava and sipped the anise-flavoured liqueur.

"This is really good," she said as she broke off another bite of the honey-laced pastry.

"How can you tell?" Snape asked dryly. "This ouzo is potent enough to numb the tongue."

"In your cups a' ready, you old sod?" Martin asked in a slurred voice. He'd come over to stand between them. He was swaying slightly, and the glass of ouzo he held tilted precariously. "You'll never do your bride justice if you're drunk, ya' know."

"The kettle and the pot, Martin," Snape said.

"Oh, I'm pissed all right," Martin agreed in an affable tone. "But I'm not too drunk to take care of your woman if you're *not up* to the challenge!" He leaned over and draped an arm across Hermione's shoulders. "Wha' d'ya say, lovey, wanna have a go with a real wizard in the bedroom?" He winked broadly and then hiccuped into Hermione's face. Hermione laughed.

Snape gave Martin a look that would have struck terror into his soul if he'd been sober enough to notice. Hermione leaned in front of Martin and put a hand on Snape's arm.

"He's a lot drunker than he thinks he is," she said. "He doesn't mean anything by it."

Snape pried Martin's arm away from Hermione. "I'm not going to kill you, Martin," he said in a reasonable tone, "because when you wake up in the morning, you won't remember insulting my wife."

"Oh, I won't remember *anything*," Martin said with certainty. And then he keeled over to land in a heap on the floor between their chairs.

"Christ on a crutch," Snape muttered as he knelt beside his old friend to be sure he was still breathing.

"Martin! Martin, you turd. Wake up!"

"I'm 'wake," Martin said with a soft snort.

Stefanos, who was only marginally more sober than Martin, hurried over. "These foreigners can't hold their ouzo," he said with an idiotic grin. "I will see him home."

"And who'll see *you* home?" Snape asked with a scowl.

Ilyssa, who'd come to stand beside Stefanos spoke up. "I'll see them both home. My Stefanos is a good, hard-working man. He seldom drinks. He told me earlier that seeing you and Hermione together reminded him of our own wedding day. That was the last time he was so ..."

"Drunk?" Snape supplied.

"Happy," Stefanos interjected. "You and your lady you look so happy. It makes me happy just looking at you and remembering my own happy wedding night. I was so ... what is the word?"

"Happy?" Hermione asked with a smile.

"Yes, that's it! I'm so happy!" He started to laugh, and Ilyssa took his arm, leading him away.

"I'll get Stefanos into the car. Would you help your friend out? I'll drive him home, as well."

"You know where he lives?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes. Everyone knows where Martin Gladstone lives."

"Does he often get sufficiently inebriated to require assistance?" Snape asked.

Ilyssa laughed. "Let's just say that he's wise enough to know when to call a taxi."

Snape grunted as he stooped down and grasped Martin under his armpits. "Stand up, you arse."

"Firs' I'm a turd, and then I'm an arse ... you're just fulla complimen's, aren't ya?"

"Just stand up and help me, Martin," Snape said. "You're going to give me a hernia."

Martin managed to get to his feet, though he was none too steady. "Wouldn't want that, would we? You'd really be hacked off then, wouldn't you, Hermione?" He looked at her morosely.

Hermione just laughed and went to his other side to help steady him.

"I could never be angry with you, Martin," she said in a pleasant tone.

"I'm angry enough for both of us," Snape muttered. He was sweating slightly as they guided Martin through the now nearly-empty restaurant and out the door. Ilyssa was behind the wheel of the car parked at the kerb, and Stefanos was sprawled on the front seat next to her.

They poured Martin into the back seat. He started singing, hugely off-key, and a moment later, Stefanos joined in.

"I don't envy you the ride, Ilyssa," Snape said as he pushed Martin's bulk over enough to be able to close the door of the tiny car.

"Oh, it's just a short ride. I'll come back in a few minutes to drive you and Hermione to your hotel," Ilyssa said.

"You don't need to come back," Snape said. "The hotel isn't more than two blocks; we'll walk."

"Oh, but you hired the taxi for the entire day!" she protested.

"The day ended when Stefanos drove us here. Tonight was a social event, not a business one. Take him home and put him to bed."

Martin stirred enough to leer at Snape. "And you'll take Hermione home and put her to bed, right?"

Snape ignored Martin and spoke to Ilyssa again. "And when you get to Martin's house, kick his arse out of your car and leave him on the pavement!"

"Oh, that was cold, Sev ... very cold," he mumbled.

Ilyssa and Hermione both smiled as the two men exchanged barbs.

"It was lovely meeting you, Ilyssa," Hermione said as she leaned into the driver's window and gave her an awkward hug.

"I wish you much happiness in your marriage," she replied.

"Thank you."

With a final wave, Ilyssa drove off leaving Hermione and Snape standing alone in front of the restaurant.

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Eight

Chapter 8 of 13

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The Best Laid Schemes

Chapter Eight

"Are you ready to leave?" Snape asked Hermione as they watched the car turn the corner and head up the coast road toward Coral Bay.

"I just need to go in and get my bag."

"I have to settle the bill with Ari, and then we can go," Snape said as he held the door open to allow Hermione to precede him inside.

Five minutes later, they were walking back out the door. Snape held Hermione's arm to guide her along the dimly lit pavement. The night was warm, but a cooling breeze was blowing in from the water.

"Ari is a generous soul," Snape said as they strolled along. "He refused to add the baklava and the ouzo to the bill, and he insisted on giving us a 'newlywed discount'."

"Everyone here has been very hospitable," Hermione said.

"I left the waiter a rather large gratuity. He'll have to clean up the broken crockery, after all."

"I ... I got rid of some of it," Hermione said a bit hesitantly as though fearing the admission would make him angry.

Snape smiled. "I did as well. I'm sure the poor sod will be grateful, if a bit puzzled."

Hermione smiled back. "I didn't get a chance to thank you earlier."

"Thank me?"

"For the flowers." She held up her bouquet. "They're beautiful."

Snape shrugged. "It was nothing."

"It wasn't 'nothing'. It was a very thoughtful thing to do, and I appreciate it."

Snape was suddenly grateful for the dim light. He was sure his face had coloured.

"It seemed you were ... disappointed ... about missing some of the more traditional aspects of a wedding."

"I think I was a bit, at least at first," Hermione admitted. "But after you left this morning I realised that I didn't actually have any preconceived notions about what my wedding should or shouldn't be like."

"Yet you didn't want me to see your dress."

"I think that was more a generic, knee-jerk response to the situation something I've heard my mum or my aunt say. I don't really believe that bad luck will ensue if the groom sees the bride's dress before the wedding. And I realised something else while I was wrapped in seaweed this afternoon ..."

"Seaweed?"

"Don't ask."

"I'm not sure I want to know," he said dryly.

"You don't; but as I was saying, today I realised that even if I'd had the opportunity to have a 'wedding' a big affair with bridesmaids and music and guest lists I wouldn't have gone that route anyway."

"No? Why not?"

"It's just not *me*. I've never fussed with my hair or my make-up, and I was never overly concerned about fashion or style. A long gown with lace and a train and a veil would

have made me feel clumsy and uncomfortable. This outfit suits me. I couldn't have found a better dress for my wedding."

"It's a lovely dress," Snape said. "Martin was right about that. You *do* look like a goddess rising from the sea."

"Thank you," Hermione replied. "I like your suit, as well. I don't think I've ever seen you in a Muggle-style suit."

"Because Spinner's End is in a Muggle area, I seldom wear robes. And you see me in Muggle clothes all the time."

"Not a suit," Hermione insisted.

"Jeans and trainers are much easier to work in, not to mention more comfortable, than a suit and tie."

"Oh, I agree. I hardly ever wear robes anymore. But I still like the suit; it makes you look quite distinguished."

"Thank you. Ah ... here's our hotel," he said. He was quite glad to leave any discussion of his looks distinguished or not behind.

A uniformed doorman opened the door for them, and they stepped through into a lavishly appointed lobby.

"I registered us earlier," he said as he led her past the front desk and straight back toward the lifts. "They gave me the key, but I didn't visit the room."

The car stopped on the fourth floor, and they stepped out into the hallway.

He glanced at the discreet signs posted and turned left. He slipped the key card from his pocket and inserted it into the electronic lock.

"There must be a mistake," he muttered as they stepped into the room.

Hermione hid a smile. "Uh ... this looks like the honeymoon suite. Did you mention we were newlyweds?"

Snape looked around the garishly decorated room incredulously. "I may have, but I certainly didn't expect this. Red velvet draperies, a mirrored ceiling, *vibrating bed*? This seems more like a brothel than a honeymoon suite. I'll make arrangements for another room immediately."

He turned back toward the door, but Hermione stopped him with a touch of her hand on his arm.

"It's just for one night, it'll be fine."

"You don't find it offensive?"

"It's certainly *tacky*, but I wouldn't call it offensive. Do you find it offensive?"

"Only to my innate sense of style and my impeccable good taste," he said dryly.

"We'll close our eyes," she said as she put her bag and her bouquet down on one of the over-stuffed settees. She looked up at him, and then she smiled. "Besides, the vibrating bed will certainly make the night memorable."

Snape slid his suit coat off and tossed it down next to her bag. Then he stepped close to her and touched her cheek gently.

"I certainly hope it won't take a vibrating bed to make the night memorable," he said in a silky tone.

"Why don't we find out?" she asked.

"Well, if you insist."

And then he bent his head and kissed her. The kiss was gentle at first, almost shy. But as he sensed her responding, he deepened the kiss, his tongue snaking out to trace her lips and to slip into her mouth to taste her.

When he lifted his lips from hers, they were both a bit breathless.

"I think it's memorable already," she said.

"I know I'm not what you might have wished for in a husband ..." he began, and as he spoke, his fingers lifted to touch his neck.

She reached up and placed two fingers across his lips, stopping his words.

"At this moment, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have as a husband." She traced his lips with her fingertip and threaded her fingers through his hair. And then she grasped his fingers in her hand and lifted them away from his neck.

"It doesn't bother me, you know," she said softly. "And neither does this," she added as she touched his arm gently.

"They bother *me*." As soon as the words left his mouth he wanted to call them back. He turned away from her and moved toward the window. He pushed the heavy curtain aside and looked out onto the nearly deserted street.

Hermione stepped behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, but she didn't speak. She rested her cheek against his back and listened as his ragged breathing evened out, and his thumping heartbeat slowed.

After a few minutes, she heard him sigh, and then he turned within the circle of her arms. Now her cheek rested on his chest, and his arms rose to wrap around her and hold her there.

"They are ugly reminders of ugly times and ugly deeds," he said in a hoarse whisper.

Hermione lifted her head, and then she pulled away slightly. She tugged at the knot of his tie, loosening it and pulling it free of his collar. She used nimble fingers to free the buttons of his shirt, spreading it open as she did and kissing the pale skin as it was exposed. At first, he tensed and tried to pull away, but she held him with one hand, caressed him with the other, and whispered soothingly between kisses. "Hush. Let me ... let me."

He dropped his arms and allowed her tender touches. She pulled his shirt from his trousers, and then she peeled it down his arms. The sleeves caught at his wrists, but she quickly released the cuff links, and the shirt fell free.

She stood on tiptoes and dipped her lips to his neck.

Again, he tensed. "Hermione ..."

"Let me," she repeated. Her lips traced the ragged edges of the scar. Her tongue laved it, and he shivered.

"You survived." She kissed the scar again and again, and each touch of her lips exorcised a bit of the lingering, painful memory of that awful night.

"You survived. Thank all the gods you survived," she whispered against his neck. Her lips touched him again. "This proves you were smarter than that bastard, and you survived."

She let her lips trail down his neck to his shoulder and then lower still. She took his arm in her hands, bending it at the elbow. She kissed along his biceps and the crease inside his elbow. And then her lips were hovering just above the faded tattoo that marred his forearm.

"It's nearly gone," she said softly.

"It will never be gone," he replied, but he didn't pull away from her.

"The others ... Lucius, Dawlish, even Narcissa ... their Marks are still dark. They fester, they itch, they burn. Yours is like Harry's scar ... fading."

His breath hissed in through clenched teeth as he felt her lips lower to touch his flesh, and he tensed again.

"Let me," she crooned over and over between kisses, between soft licks. "Let me, Severus."

Never had the Mark given him anything but pain, and he braced himself to feel the fire burning once again. But all he felt was the softness of her lips and then the gentle sweep of her tongue.

Her lips moved across his flesh in tender, healing strokes. Up and down his arm, across his chest, over his neck and then back again. Her lips made a pilgrimage across his body over and over again until every bit of tension and discomfort had been drawn from him.

A different kind of tension began to fill him then a different kind of discomfort. And when her bottom teeth scraped lightly across his nipple, he hissed with a different kind of pain.

"Fuck ... oh, fuck, Hermione," he groaned. He took her face between his hands and kissed her deeply, hungrily.

She arched against him, a low moan seeping out from their joined lips.

He bent his knees slightly and scooped her up into his arms. He walked over to the bed and placed her gently atop the tufted, red velvet duvet. He dropped down next to her and stretched out beside her, his elbow on the bed, and his head resting on his hand. His other hand moved along the length of her body, beginning with soft strokes across her cheeks and feathery touches along her neck. He skimmed her breasts lightly, and he felt her shiver slightly as his hand drifted across her belly and cupped her mound through the beautiful, gauzy dress she'd chosen as her wedding gown. His hand slid along her hip and down over her thigh. Then he lifted his hand back to her face and started the journey again.

"I've been alone my entire life," he said as he looked into her eyes, his hand cupping her cheek. "I never thought I'd marry and I probably never would have if not for this insane law. But at this moment, I can't imagine being married to anyone but you."

She smiled up at him. Her fingers twined through his hair, and she tugged him down, urging him to stretch out over her. She spread her legs slightly and he settled himself into the cradle of her hips. He could feel the heat radiating from her core, and he knew she could feel his hardness through the layers of clothing they still wore. He bent his head to hers and kissed her again.

"But now that I *am* married," he said when he lifted his lips from hers a few minutes later, "I intend to take full advantage of the ... privileges ... that go along with being married."

Hermione licked her suddenly dry lips. "The law does state that the ... the marriage act ... must take place at least once a week."

"I think I'd prefer once a day," Snape said with a small quirk of his lips. "I've a lot of lonely nights to make up for."

"Once a day?"

"And twice on Sunday," he murmured as he licked the delicate whorl of her ear.

"Today is Sunday, isn't it?" Hermione asked as she turned her head so that he could nip at the sensitive column of her neck.

"Not quite; it's nearly midnight, though."

"Then you'd better finish up with Saturday, hadn't you?" she asked in a solemn tone.

He chuckled softly and set about to follow her instructions.

Although she couldn't have articulated why, Hermione was surprised to discover that Severus was a tender, considerate lover. He undressed her slowly, touching and kissing her as he did. He took his time to make sure she was aroused and ready before he entered her. He rocked over her slowly, bringing her to orgasm before he allowed himself his own release.

She was even more surprised that when it was over, he stretched out beside her, wrapped an arm around her, and drew her head to his chest.

Severus Snape was a cuddler? No one would believe her not that she'd tell anyone anyway. She smiled inwardly at the idea of dropping that little titbit at the next Hogwarts reunion. And then she draped her arm across his chest and settled herself comfortably against his side.

No one would ever know this side of Severus. It was too special, too incredible to share with anyone. She hugged the thought to herself and smiled against his chest.

She had never felt closer or more attuned to anyone in her life.

"We could chance a contraceptive charm," Snape said a few moments later. "It's unlikely the Ministry could detect it from here."

"It's the wrong time of the month for me to get pregnant, but we won't need a charm anyway," Hermione replied.

"No?"

"Do you know what an IUD is?" Hermione asked.

"Yes."

"I went to my doctor my Muggle doctor right after the new law passed. The Ministry may have coerced me into marriage by threatening to take away my magic, but they won't turn me into a brood mare. When and if I decide to have children, it will be *my* choice."

"Clever witch." He brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead.

"I was nervous when I went for my fertility exam, but the Healers at St. Mungo's didn't find anything amiss."

"Even if they'd detected it during the exam, it's unlikely they would have realised its purpose. The wizarding world has relied upon charms and potions to prevent pregnancy for centuries. The idea of a birth control *device* is quite outside their reality."

"Sometimes being a Muggle-born has its advantages," she replied.

"Indeed. And an IUD has advantages for me, as well. I won't have to stop at the chemist shop on my way home."

Hermione smiled. "Were you planning to?"

"Yes, I was. And, as unlikely as it was, if the Ministry had discovered I was using condoms, I would have explained that their purpose was to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, conveniently omitting any other purpose they might serve."

"You would have told them you had an STD?"

"Of course not; I would have told them *you* had an STD."

Hermione pulled out of his arms and sat up, drawing the sheet up to cover herself.

"What?"

Snape reached up and stroked her cheek.

"I'm *joking*, Hermione."

Hermione huffed out a breath. "I knew that."

"Of course you did," he said with a barely hidden smile. "Now, get back down here. It's after midnight, it's Sunday, and I'm behind schedule."

"Twice on Sunday, right?" Hermione said as she moved back down and turned to him eagerly.

"Oh, yes," Snape murmured and began kissing her.

Author's Note: This story was written for the Potter Place's Variety Challenge. This is the prompt I chose: Something Old Revisit a once popular challenge. I chose to revisit the Marriage Law Challenge, but I've placed the story in a post-DH timeline.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Nine

It was late Sunday evening when Snape and Hermione returned to London. They flew into Heathrow, claimed their bags, and then searched for a darkened area from which they could Apparate without being seen.

It was cool and windy, and a light rain was falling as they stepped outside the terminal and ducked around a corner.

"I'll join you in a few minutes," Hermione said as she shrunk down her bag and prepared to leave. She was wearing a light-weight blouse, and she shivered slightly. She'd dressed for Cyprus that morning, not London. "I'll use the Floo from my flat; I hope it isn't too dirty."

"Do you need something from your flat? And why would you use the Floo?" he asked in a genuinely puzzled tone.

"Because I don't feel like walking a kilometre in the rain."

"You can Apparate directly into the house from here," Snape said.

"I can? When did you have time to change your wards?" She shivered again.

Snape twitched his wand out of his sleeve and aimed it at her. She felt an invisible layer of warmth settle over her. "I didn't have to change them," he said. "We're married; your magical signature is linked to mine now. I couldn't keep you out, even if I wanted to."

She bit her bottom lip nervously. "I've invaded your last bastion of privacy, haven't I?"

Snape shrugged. "I would hardly keep you out of your own home. Besides, it works both ways, you know. You've no privacy any longer, either. Better hide your diary."

Her brows drew together, and she frowned. "You wouldn't ..."

Snape smiled as he draped an arm across her shoulders. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "No, I wouldn't," he assured her. "Now, let's go home, shall we? There's still a bit of Sunday left."

Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "Yes, let's go home."

A moment later there was only a slightly drier spot amid the wet to mark the place they'd been standing.

"Severus? Hermione? Are you here?" Filius Flitwick's voice, magically amplified, boomed through the Floo.

Snape paused with his mug of coffee halfway between the table and his mouth.

"Bloody early, isn't he?" he muttered.

"Maybe he's had a breakthrough he's eager to tell us about," Hermione replied as she picked up her own mug.

"It's more likely he wants to pester us with impertinent questions about our marriage, especially the wedding night." Snape waited until Hermione had taken a sip of coffee before he spoke again. "The randy old bugger probably hasn't got laid in years."

Hermione choked, and coffee sprayed from her lips. She somehow managed to keep it from spewing from her nose as well. She coughed and gasped for breath.

"You'll see," he replied as he patted her solicitously on the back. With a casual flick of his wand, he cleaned the spilled coffee from the table.

"How did it go?" Filius asked a few minutes later as he settled himself on a high stool and held a mug out expectantly. Hermione filled it with coffee and then sat down next to Snape.

"We're married," Snape said in a flat tone.

"And the Wizengamot will have no grounds to annul the marriage, correct?" He leaned forward eagerly.

Snape looked to Hermione and arched his brow. "I told you, didn't I? Prurient old sod."

"Me?" Filius squeaked. He tried to look indignant, but failed. "I'm merely concerned that the validity of your marriage may be questioned."

"Right."

Hermione leaned across the table and put a hand on the diminutive wizard's arm. "It was a legally contracted marriage, magically witnessed, and ..." she paused and looked toward her husband.

"... and duly consummated," Snape added tersely. "And that's the last we'll say *on that* subject."

"As if I wanted to hear *details*," Filius muttered into his mug of coffee. And then his head jerked up as something else Hermione had said registered on his consciousness.

"Magically witnessed?" Filius pushed his half-empty mug aside. "You had a wizarding ceremony?"

"We had a civil ceremony," Snape explained. "However, an old friend of mine, who happens to be a wizard, and also happens to be a fourth or fifth cousin, witnessed the marriage and signed the marriage certificate."

"Oh, well done!" Filius exclaimed. He picked up his mug again and took a sip. He smacked his lips appreciatively before he spoke again. "Although you won't be making any friends at the Ministry."

Snape snorted softly. "I've no friends in the Ministry."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not in the least." Snape turned to Hermione. "Does it bother you?"

A number of thoughts flashed through her mind. She'd once thought Arthur Weasley was her friend, but when it came down to it, he'd chosen his son over her. While that stung Ron had been a cheating bastard, after all she understood and accepted that his family was more important to him than she was. Harry, who worked in the Aurors' office, had once been her friend, but by dint of his marriage to Ginny, he, too, was Ron's family now, and that friendship had cooled as well.

"Hermione?" Snape reached out and touched her hand.

"What?" She shook her head slightly bringing herself back to the conversation at hand. "Oh, no ... no ... I'm prepared to be *persona non grata* at the Ministry. In fact, I'm quite looking forward to it," she added grimly.

"You always were a fighter," Filius said.

"We're both fighters," she said as she turned her hand under her husband's and grasped it firmly. "Aren't we?"

Snape returned the pressure of her hand. "Yes, but now we're fighting for the same thing."

"We always were," she said with conviction.

Snape looked down into her earnest face. She believed in him. She always had. He felt a sudden swell of emotion and had to resist the urge to drag her back to the bed they'd just tumbled out of an hour before. (Why did 'twice' have to remain an option only on Sunday, after all?) She looked up at him, her lips parted in silent invitation.

"We don't have time for a honeymoon!" Filius exclaimed.

The sound of Filius Flitwick's distressed squeal was enough to break the mood.

Snape turned toward Filius and glared.

"Unless you've got yourself married in the last few days, there's no 'we' on this honeymoon," he growled.

"No, I haven't got myself married more's the pity because I'd make some witch very happy," Filius replied.

"Well, it won't be *my* witch." Snape draped a possessive arm across Hermione's shoulder.

"From the look on her face, I'd say you've already taken care of that," Filius said.

"Oh, yes," Hermione said with a smile and a sigh.

"And you said you wouldn't give me details," Filius said with undisguised glee.

"You really are a pervert, Filius," Snape said, but there was no heat in his words.

"A man needs his small pleasures."

"Very small," Snape muttered.

While Filius spluttered, Hermione tried to stifle a giggle.

Snape merely smirked.

A few minutes later, they had composed themselves enough to get back to a serious discussion of the business at hand.

"Have you made any progress with the charms?" Hermione asked.

Filius shook his head sadly. "No matter how promising a line of research seems when I begin, it soon turns into a dead end. I fear we're no closer to a solution now than we were a month ago, or even a year ago."

"I have some ingredients coming from Cyprus," Snape said. "They should be here today. Perhaps a totally new potion is the answer rather than a modification of a potion already in use."

"Totally new charms may be the answer for us as well," Hermione added.

"Almost all charms are developed from older, existing charms," Filius said. "Creating a new charm one not built on the foundation of another is painstaking work. It takes weeks, sometimes months, of trial and error."

"Then we'd better get started, hadn't we?" Hermione asked.

Hermione and Filius sat side-by-side at their work table for most of the day, stopping only to use the loo and to eat the sandwiches that Snape hurriedly prepared.

When the package with his ingredients was delivered in the early afternoon, Snape retreated to his lab and didn't emerge until nearly eight o'clock.

A glance at the work table told him that Hermione and Filius had called it a day as well. He walked into the kitchen, his nose twitching appreciatively at the unmistakable scent of fish and chips.

"I was just about to roust you out of your cave," Hermione said with a smile as she set the table. "Dinner's ready."

"You cooked?" Snape asked.

"Don't be ridiculous. You know I can't cook, especially something as complicated as fish and chips. I popped over to the chip shop."

"I would have made something," he said. "Probably not fish and chips, although they're not nearly as complicated as you seem to think."

Hermione gave him a *'yeah, right* look, and Snape smiled at her expression.

"You've been working all day. Besides, I looked in the cupboard. There's not much in there."

"I'm sure I could have come up with something," he responded automatically, but in truth he was tired and quite happy not to have to prepare dinner.

"I'll have to get to the grocer," he added.

"We can stop on our way back from the Ministry tomorrow," Hermione said.

"We will, provided the Special Coordinator doesn't have us thrown into Azkaban once our current situation becomes known."

"You don't think that's likely do you?" she asked as she opened the packets of paper-wrapped fried fish and golden chips and filled their plates.

"I was using hyperbole," Snape said.

"I knew that."

"Of course you did."

He took the plates from her hands and set them on the small kitchen table. He sat on one side of the small kitchen table and Hermione sat on the other. She opened the bottle of malt vinegar and liberally doused her fish.

"We're legally married and neither the Special Coordinator nor the Wizengamot can change that," Snape said.

"That doesn't mean they won't try," Hermione replied.

"Let them; I'm always up for a good fight."

"Tomorrow will be interesting, to say the least," Hermione said as she picked up her fork.

London was cold, wet, and dreary. Had Snape been going to the Ministry to enter into an arranged marriage with Sybill Trelawney, he was sure his mood would have been just as dreary and miserable. But as he and Hermione made their way to the Ministry, he was almost cheerful. He was quite looking forward to the kaffuffle that was sure to erupt when his and Hermione's marriage was revealed.

An untidy-looking wizard holding a Muggle-style clipboard and a bedraggled quill was waiting just inside the entrance when Snape and Hermione stepped out of the phone box that served as the visitors' entrance to the Ministry of Magic.

"Name?" the wizard said without looking up.

"Severus Snape."

The man ran a grubby finger down the list of names on his clipboard. He stuck his tongue out between moist, sausage-shaped lips and wet the tip of the quill. When it was sufficiently slobbery, he made a check mark on the tattered piece of parchment on the clipboard.

"Me name's Calvin. I'll be escortin' ye to the weddin' office, but ye'r early. There's another wedding scheduled afore yours. Ye'll have to wait here."

"My wedding is the one scheduled before his," Hermione said. "But I've invited him to be with me today."

"So ye'd be Herman Granger, then?" the man asked as he looked at her doubtfully.

"My name is *Hermione*."

"Oh ... sorry." He didn't appear the least bit sorry, however. He scratched his head, and a shower of white flakes drifted down.

"Well, get a wiggle on, then. Yer groom is already 'ere. Ye come, too," he said pointing to Snape. "It'll save me a walk to an' fro. Me feet are killin' me."

As they followed the man down the corridor, Snape leaned over and whispered into Hermione's ear. "So, 'yer groom is already 'ere'. Lucky witch. He never mentioned my bride at all."

Hermione turned her head and caught the sardonic twist of his lips.

"My groom is most definitely here," she said. "And I'm a very lucky witch indeed."

She reached out and took his hand in hers.

"What a brazen hussy you are, my dear," he said as he returned the pressure of her fingers. "Even as 'yer' groom awaits you within the marriage office, you're cavorting through the corridors of the Ministry of Magic with that reprobate, Severus Snape or so the gossips will tell the tale. Are you trying to create a scandal?"

"Do you think we will?" she asked.

"Undoubtedly."

"Lovely; I've always wanted to create a scandal."

Snape chuckled softly.

"Ere ye go," the unkempt wizard said as he stopped before a thick oak door. The brass plaque on it looked new. It read: **Office of the Extraordinary Registrar**.

Calvin turned the doorknob and pushed the heavy door inward.

Hermione paused to draw a breath.

"Go on. I can' leave until ye'r inside, and me legs are achin'."

"Don't you trust me to go inside if you leave?" Hermione asked sharply.

"Look, miss, I'm jus' tryin' to make a livin'. Me missus swells when I hang me trousers on th' bedpost I got six kids a'ready and another bun in th' oven. I don' know what th' bleedin' problem is wi' th' rest of ye, and I really don' care. Now, step inside."

"Go on, Hermione," Snape said. "I'll join you in a moment."

She nodded and walked through the door. It swung shut behind her.

Snape turned back to their escort. "Do you and your wife use a contraceptive potion?"

"None of yer effing business," the man snapped.

Snape put a hand on the man's shoulder in a friendly manner. "Listen ... Calvin is it? With six children, you're exempt from the restrictions imposed by the C.R.A.P. statute and not subject to penalties or incarceration ..."

"Wha'?"

"It's all right if you use a potion to prevent pregnancy you won't get in trouble if you tell me," Snape explained in simpler terms.

"Huh! She swallows tha' slop ever' nigh' and she still got knocked up agin. She's threatenin' to tie a knot in my ..."

"Ouch," Snape commented sympathetically. Now that he'd engaged the man in conversation, he removed his hand from Calvin's shoulder and wiped it surreptitiously on his trouser leg.

"To tell the truth, I'm no' sure gettin' laid is worth it anymore." He had a morose look about him.

"I understand completely, and I may be able to help you."

The man looked at Snape suspiciously. "Why woul' ye wanna help me?"

"Just call me a humanitarian."

"I don' care nothin' abou' religion."

Before Snape could formulate a reply to that comment, the heavy oak door swung open again, and Hermione's head of tousled curls appeared.

"Severus, get in here. Now!" Her voice held an edge of panic. She ducked back inside the room, but left the door open.

"It appears I'm needed inside," Snape said, "but I'm serious about trying to help you and your ... missus ... with your problem. You can contact me via the Floo ..."

"As if I kin afford a Floo connection," Calvin scoffed.

"Send me an owl, then. You have my name." He pointed to Calvin's clipboard. "We'll make arrangements to meet and discuss your options."

"I'll talk to Effie. If she's agreeable, like, I'll le' ye know."

"Severus!"

The tone of Hermione's voice had risen from merely panicked to nearly hysterical.

Snape nodded at Calvin and then slipped through the opened door and into the office of the Extraordinary Registrar.

"Is there a problem, Hermione?" he asked calmly as he walked to the front of the room. He nodded at Mundungus Fletcher, who was standing next to Hermione, his hand wrapped around her lower arm as though to prevent her from leaving his side again. He looked as if he hadn't bathed or changed his clothes since the last time Snape had seen him well before the Final Battle. Behind a podium set up in front of them stood a short, plump wizard wearing robes of such an eye searing chartreuse that even Gilderoy Lockhart wouldn't have worn them.

"Severus, this is Jonathan Loxley, he's the Extraordinary Registrar," Hermione said.

"Are you here to witness the happy event?" the luridly robed wizard asked jovially. "We're just about to get started."

"Actually, I'm here to *prevent* the 'happy event'," Snape replied.

Loxley's voice lost its joviality. "This is a Ministry arranged and approved marriage. There's no preventing these proceedings unless one of the parties involved has decided to exercise the Right of Exemption and surrender his or her wand?"

He looked from Hermione to Mundungus expectantly.

"No," Hermione said; Mundungus shook his head.

"Then we'll proceed," the Loxley said.

"I think not," Snape said. "Hermione Granger cannot marry Mundungus Fletcher because she is already legally wed to another wizard. I do believe that bigamy has been illegal in the wizarding world for nearly four hundred years."

"And to whom is Miss Granger married?" Loxley asked in a snooty tone.

"She's married to *me*," Snape answered as he reached into his pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. "And I have the Certificate of Marriage to prove it." Then he turned to Mundungus Fletcher and spoke again. "I suggest you unhand my wife, Fletcher, else I'll be forced to take appropriate measures to defend her honour." He stared pointedly at the hand still holding Hermione's arm.

"Oh, righ', righ'," Mundungus muttered as he hastily withdrew his hand. "No offence intended, mate. I didn't know she was yer's."

"Now you know."

"Righ'," he muttered again. "She's a migh' bi' skinny for me tastes anyway; and it's no' like I really wanted to ge' married."

"Then why did you put yourself on the list?" Hermione asked.

"Wha' list?"

"The list of unmarried, fertile wizards, of course. You're over the age requirement, and you wouldn't even have been on the list unless you volunteered and passed a fertility exam at St. Mungo's."

"I never volunteer fer nothin'. Tha's a sure way fer a man to ge' into more trouble than 'e needs," he insisted. "And I ain' been near St. Mungo's since a-fore the war."

"Then how do you happen to be here today?" Snape asked.

"Well now, tha's a bi' of a story," Mundungus said. He rocked back on his heels and reached up toward his mouth. He quickly dropped his hand when he realised his pipe wasn't in its usual place.

"Just give us the abbreviated version," Snape snapped.

"Huh?"

"Make it quick."

"It's like this, see ... I was after sellin' some odd bits an' pieces ... er ... fer a friend o' mine, when there was a question abou' some taxes due on the ... *thamports*."

"You were caught trying to fence smuggled goods," Snape surmised.

"Tha's a bit harsh, ain' it? A man's go' a righ' ter make a livin' ain' he?"

"What happened next?" Snape asked.

"This here bloke from the Ministry come to me cell an' tol' me there was a way ter ... *tereduce* the charges, like. 'E tol' me to show up 'ere today and ge' married. I said 'no' a' firs', bu' then the bloke reminded me abou' the ... the *benefits* of havin' a woman ter come home to.

"O' course 'e also reminded me tha' if I didn' agree, I'd be goin' to Azkaban." He shuddered slightly.

"So, 'ere I am," he added in a sad tone.

"Who was this 'bloke' from the Ministry?"

"I never saw 'im afore 'e showed up ou'side me cell."

"He didn't tell you his name?" Hermione asked.

Mundungus shook his head. "Now tha' I think abou' it, 'e never did."

"And you didn't think that was strange?"

"All I cared abou' was gettin' ou' of there," Mundungus said flatly. "I wasn't even goin' to show up today, bu' tha' bloke, he came to me flat las' nigh' to remind me. Said I'd be sorry if I weren' 'ere."

"You'll be a lot sorrier if you stay," Snape commented. "Have a good life, Fletcher. Just be sure you live it far, far away from me and mine. Now, get out of here before I change my mind."

"Righ'."

Mundungus turned and began moving as quickly as his bandy little legs would carry him toward the exit.

Loxley, who'd been watching and listening to the exchange between Snape, Hermione, and Mundungus with rapt fascination, spoke for first time in several minutes.

"Mr. Fletcher!" Loxley's voice rang out, and Mundungus turned back.

"Wha'?"

"You can challenge the legality of this so-called marriage, you know."

"Are you ou' of yer bleedin' mind? Tha's Severus Snape. 'E were a Death Eater, you know. You wanna challenge 'im, you be my gues'. I'm leavin'!"

And leave he did.

"This is highly irregular," Loxley said as the door slammed behind Mundungus Fletcher. "May I see that document?"

"Of course," Snape replied. "You may even keep this one. It's a copy, but I can produce the original if need be. Martin Gladstone, the wizard who witnessed our marriage, is also ready to appear if you require that he do so."

Loxley examined the paper. After a few moments he spoke. "I don't believe that will be necessary. This document appears to be in order. Since Mr. Fletcher has expressed no interest in challenging Miss Granger's marriage to you, I have the authority to recognise and validate her legal status." He drew his wand and touched it to the paper in his hand. It shimmered briefly and an ornate signature appeared on the bottom. He barely blinked as pale blue sparks shimmered briefly. "I'll just make an authorised copy for the files." He touched his wand to the paper again. "Here's your copy," he said, handing the paper back to Snape. "The other one has been filed."

He bowed slightly. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Snape."

"Thank you," Hermione said with a smile. Snape merely nodded.

"It seems our assumption that there was a hidden agenda has been verified," Snape said to Hermione.

"Yes, but the question of who and why remains open," Hermione replied.

"While this little drama has been entertaining," Loxley interrupted, "I'm going to have to ask you both to leave now. I've another wedding to perform; the bride and groom are probably waiting outside."

Now Snape did smile. "The bride might very well be waiting outside, but she'll soon discover she's lacking a groom."

Loxley looked perplexed until Snape pointed to the schedule on his podium.

"Sybill Trelawney and ... Severus Snape."

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Ten

Chapter 10 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Ten

"Will you need another copy of our Certificate of Marriage *formy* file?" Snape asked with a smirk.

Before Loxley could answer, the door banged open, and Sybill Trelawney swept in, with many bespangled and tasselled shawls trailing along the floor, and dozens of bracelets and bangles clacking noisily against each other.

"Oh, my dear, dear Severus," she trilled as she approached the front of the room. "I knew this day would come. I knew my patience would be rewarded."

"Is that so?" Snape said.

She sidled up next to him, actually nudging Hermione away from him as she touched her hand to his. "It certainly is so! I can't tell you how many times I read my tea leaves and saw your name in them. Or how many times I looked into my crystal ball and saw this very room with the two of us standing here together, dedicating ourselves to each other."

Her eyes, huge-looking through her heavy, thick glasses, stared up at him adoringly.

"I suggest you get your crystal ball cleaned, then. I'm not marrying you."

"What are you saying, Severus? Of course we're to be married. It's fated. The tea leaves don't lie. The crystal ball ..."

"... is merely glass, and tea leaves are rubbish," Snape said.

"You can't mean that ..."

"I most certainly do mean that. But even if I believed in the prophetic properties of tea leaves or crystal balls, I couldn't marry you; I'm already married."

"It isn't true ..."

"I'm sorry to tell you, Miss Trelawney, but it's true," Loxley put in. "I validated his marriage and filed his Certificate of Marriage myself."

"Would you like to see it?" Snape asked as he held up his copy.

"That's impossible," Sybill said in a suddenly hostile tone. "Who would marry you?"

"I would," Hermione said, stepping forward and speaking for the first time since her former Divination teacher had entered the room. "And I did."

"Mr. Snape and Miss Granger ... Mrs. Snape now ... are legally married," Loxley added smugly.

"That's a lie," Sybill hissed at Loxley, ignoring Hermione completely. "I know she's just been married to Mundungus Fletcher."

"I couldn't marry him for the same reason Severus can't marry you," Hermione said. "Severus and I are already married ... to each other."

"I had the right to challenge his marriage before it was validated," she shouted. Little bits of spittle were flying from her lips as she raged.

Loxley shook his head. "When Miss Granger ... er ... Mrs. Snape ..."

"Stop calling her that!" Sybill was screaming now.

"It doesn't matter what I call her," Loxley said. He took the copy of the Marriage Certificate from Snape's hand and held it out to Sybill. "She had a magically witnessed Certificate of Marriage, and her would-be husband, Mundungus Fletcher, refused to challenge it. I had no choice but to validate her marriage."

"And although it wasn't his intention," Snape interjected, "his validation of Hermione's marriage also served to validate mine. Your right to challenge became a moot point."

"And where did this purported marriage take place?" Sybill asked. "I know it wasn't here."

"Cyprus," Snape replied. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Cyprus? You can't have gone to Cyprus. Travel has been restricted."

"Magical travel has been restricted. We flew on an aeroplane," Hermione said.

"You had a Muggle marriage? Sybill said disdainfully. "The Wizengamot won't recognise a Muggle marriage!"

"It was magically witnessed," Loxley put in. "I verified that." He held up the Certificate of Marriage again.

"Let me see that," Sybill said. She snatched the paper from his hand and held it up to her face, her eyes widening as she read each line.

"You're an incompetent nincompoop! You should have called me!" She was brandishing her wand wildly now. "Get out!" she shouted. "Get out! Your services are no longer required!"

"You can't sack me, you barmy old crone." Jonathan Loxley sniffed and thrust both of his chins into the air. "I work for the Ministry of Magic, and I report directly to the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages."

"I'm the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages," Sybill shouted. "And I have sacked you. Now, get out of my sight!"

"I have a contract, you know. You can't terminate me without cause ..." His voice trailed off as Sybill raised her wand and pointed it at him.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Loxley paled and backed away. He pulled his brightly coloured robes around himself and marched toward the door with an air of highly affronted dignity.

"You'll be hearing from my solicitor!" he called over his shoulder as he pulled the heavy door open. There was a high pitched yelp as Sybill's Stinging Hex caught him on his more-than-ample bottom.

With her wand still raised, she spun back to face Snape and Hermione, who had both pulled their wands while Sybill was engaged with Loxley. Now they raised them, prepared to defend themselves should it prove necessary.

"I'm hereby annulling your marriage," Sybill said. She crumpled their Certificate of Marriage and tossed it into the air. She aimed her wand at it and cackled as it burst into flame.

Snape smiled thinly, but he never lowered his wand.

"All you've destroyed is one of our copies," he said. "We have others. Furthermore, only the Wizengamot can authorize the annulment of a marriage, and only under very narrowly defined circumstances; ours will stand."

"The Wizengamot will do exactly as I tell it to do just as it's been doing the past five years," Sybill said with certitude. "Especially when I remind them of the prophecy."

"What prophecy?" Snape asked.

"Why, the prophecy I made regarding the imminent demise of the wizarding world, of course."

"You wouldn't have remembered a legitimate prophecy."

"True," Sybill said with a careless shrug. "But, *incredibly*, neither the Chief Warlock nor the Minister for Magic remembered that tiny, little detail."

She laughed, and her eyes glowed with madness. Her wand tip was crackling with unfocused magical energy.

She turned to Hermione, her wand raised. "I must say, my dear, I was quite impressed when I read your early papers correlating the data about the falling birth rates. I'd expected I'd have to *arrange* for someone to discover the information and reach the conclusions you came to all on your own. And your coining of the term 'toxic magic' was absolutely inspired! After that, the Wizengamot was eager to listen to me and to believe the prophecy.

"And then you spoiled everything by sending additional information about the work you and the others were doing with fertility charms and potions. The effects of the toxic magic were fading faster than I thought they would, and I couldn't let that become known. I couldn't allow the Wizengamot to adopt a 'wait and see' attitude!"

From the corner of his eye, Snape saw Arthur Weasley slip into the room. He had his wand drawn. He pointed it toward Sybill, but he stopped when Snape gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. Although it was trembling in her hands, Sybill's wand was still pointed at Hermione.

"You gave the Wizengamot the skewed data," Hermione said with dawning comprehension.

"Of course, I did. Or at least I gave it to a few key people, most notably our beloved, but far too gullible, Minister for Magic. Once they understood the dire state of affairs, they were eager to do whatever needed to be done to rectify the situation. They were also eager to take advantage of my unique talents talents which would guarantee that the wizarding world would be pulled from the brink of extinction. I was also able to convince them that I would best be able to serve the needs of the people if my identity remained a secret."

"Because if the general population knew their fates were being decided by a charlatan with a cracked crystal ball and a dirty tea bag, they would have rebelled," Snape said.

"There are always ... sceptics. I couldn't allow those sceptics to interfere with my objective."

"Oh, yes, you could hardly allow anyone to obfuscate your plans with anything as unimaginative as the truth, could you?"

"The people I guided went on to influence the rest of the sheep that make up the Wizengamot and to convince them to follow the correct path my path."

"How many times did you use the Imperius *to guide* people?" Snape demanded.

"Can't you see that I had no choice? I was running out of time," Sybill said in a petulant tone.

"The toxic magic is gone, isn't it?" Hermione asked.

"Not entirely. There are pockets of it in various places, but its effects began to diminish a few years after the Dark Lord fell. Even my containment charms are beginning to fail now, and the birth rates are readjusting themselves. I'm the only one who's seen that data, of course, but it's getting more and more difficult to disguise the numbers."

"That explains the *who*," Snape said to Hermione, though his eyes never left Sybill, and his wand was still at the ready. "I still don't understand ~~th~~*why*, however."

Sybill's fingers tightened around her wand, and her features twisted into a mask of fury. Any trace of petulance was gone from her voice. "Why? You dare ~~ask~~*why*?"

"I know why," Hermione said quietly. She lowered her wand and took a step toward her former professor.

"You love him, don't you?"

"Don't be absurd," Sybill said, but she her eyes didn't meet Hermione's. Her wand was shaking in her hand as it wavered, pointing first at Hermione and then at Snape.

Arthur was shifting from foot to foot as he tried to find an angle from which he could disable or disarm Sybill. Snape betrayed no such nervousness, but he was also assessing the situation and looking for an opening. Both were fearful that as she fell, Sybill would unleash her chaotic magic against Hermione.

And Hermione made the situation even more perilous when she took another step closer to Sybill.

"You loved him, and he didn't love you back. This was a way for you to finally have your heart's desire."

"I thought he wanted me," she said. Her voice had dropped to a low, dream-like tone. Her eyes had a faraway look. "He made love to me ..."

"I *never* ..."

Hermione held up a hand, and Snape fell silent.

"Not with his body," Sybill crooned, "but with his words. He said he cared for me. He promised me that we'd be together. And when he discovered that I didn't know the rest of the prophecy that I didn't even remember making it he pushed me aside.

"I tried for years to win back his affections. He laughed when I offered myself to him ~~he~~*laughed*!"

"And you laughed at me, as well." Now she did meet Hermione's eyes, and hers were filled with fury and madness. "You ridiculed my gift, and you broke my favourite crystal ball."

Her wand was nearly pointed at the floor by now, and Hermione took another step closer to her. She was a mere two metres away now.

"I'm sorry, Professor Trelawney," Hermione said.

"Oh, I forgive you, dearie," Sybill said in a suddenly reasonable tone. "You were young, and being Muggle-born, you weren't able to appreciate my gift. I would have had the Wizengamot annul your marriage to Mundungus Fletcher in a few years. You would have suffered enough by then, I think.

"And, of course, I've already forgiven you, my darling Severus," Sybill said as she looked up into Snape's stony visage. "Once we're properly married, I'll release the last of my charms and announce that the toxic magic is gone. I may even allow the Wizengamot to repeal the Marriage Law ... eventually. Many of the marriages I've arranged will be dissolved, but ours will last forever."

"You've forgotten that I'm already married," Snape said.

Her lips curved into a slight, enigmatic smile. "I haven't forgotten."

She moved quickly, her wand hand coming up, and her eyes narrowing to focus on Hermione.

"*Avada* ..."

Two Stupefying spells hit Sybill at nearly the same moment. One had come from Snape's wand, and the other from Arthur's. Sybill's eyes went wide with shock, and then she fell to the floor, her wand spilling out of her hand, spitting sparks as it rolled across the floor.

Hermione shuddered, and her body stiffened as the overlapping nimbuses of the two powerful spells washed over her. She didn't fall, however, and actually managed to step over Sybill's wand as it skittered past her.

Snape didn't even look at the fallen witch as he rushed to Hermione's side. She was swaying slightly, and he put his arm around her waist to steady her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head to clear it, but when a wave of dizziness passed over her, she realised that wasn't a very good idea.

"Dizzy," she mumbled. "What happened?"

Snape's brow furrowed with concern. Stunning spells didn't usually interfere with memory, but she had absorbed excess energy from two spells cast at the same time.

He guided her to one of the visitors' chairs.

"Sit down before you fall and injure yourself further."

Arthur hurried over from the other side of the room. He gingerly picked up Sybill's wand, which had finally stopped sputtering, and tucked it into a deep pocket inside his robes.

"Hermione, are you hurt?" he asked in an anxious tone as he leaned over her.

"I'm ... I'm fine, I think. What happened?" she repeated.

Snape turned to Arthur. "I need to take her to St. Mungo's. She may have a concussion."

Arthur straightened and then glanced at Sybill's crumpled form. "We need to get Sybill there as well," he said. "She's unconscious."

"She can rot," Snape snapped out. "It's Hermione I'm concerned about. That bitch tried to kill her!"

"And she'll face charges before the Wizengamot for that and for many other crimes, as well."

Snape snorted softly. "Charges? She'll be lucky if I don't kill her myself if Hermione's been hurt."

Arthur raised his wand, and a small, silvery shape burst from its tip and scampered away.

"You go on and take Hermione. I've sent my Patronus ahead to St. Mungo's to prepare them for your arrival." Next he flicked his wand at the large fireplace that took up most of the far wall. "And I've opened the Floo for you. Once you're clear, I'll follow with Sybill."

Before Snape could respond, the door to the marriage chamber burst open, and several people rushed in, including Jonathan Loxley and Calvin.

"Wha's all this ruckus abou'?" Calvin asked.

Loxley went bug-eyed as he recognised Arthur. "Minister! What ..."

Arthur ignored everyone and spoke to Snape.

"Go. I'll handle this."

Snape nodded. He turned back to Hermione and lifted her into his arms. Her eyes closed, and she went limp. Snape felt a surge of fear.

"Hermione?" He shook her gently.

She stirred a bit when he spoke her name and blinked her eyes open blearily.

"What happened?" she asked for the third time.

"You were hit with a *Stupefy*," he answered.

"Oh."

"Hold on to me, now. I'm taking you to St. Mungo's."

"All right." She wound her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder.

"You smell nice," she murmured as she buried her nose in his neck and inhaled deeply.

"She's off her head," Snape muttered as he shifted her a bit awkwardly to grab a pinch of Floo powder. He tightened his hold on her and stepped into the flaring green fire.

"St. Mungo's Emergency Room," he said in a clear, firm voice. They spun briefly and disappeared.

When they were gone, Arthur spoke to the small crowd that had gathered. "The excitement is over. Please, everyone, go back to your duties."

"But what *happened*?" Loxley asked. "Is Miss Trelawney dead? And is she really the Special Coordinator?"

"She is merely unconscious," Arthur said, ignoring Loxley's second question. "I'm taking her to St. Mungo's. I must insist that you all go back to work. I must also insist that you not discuss anything you've seen or heard here today with anyone."

People started shuffling out of the room, but even as they left, Arthur could hear them talking and speculating.

"Didja see her just layin' there ..."

"She looked dead to me ..."

"... and did you see *Snape* ..."

Arthur waited a few moments, and then he cast a Levitating Charm on his former Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages. He guided her toward the fireplace and threw in his own measure of Floo powder. He pushed Sybill, none too gently, into the flames, and then he stepped in next to her, keeping a guiding hand on her arm.

"St. Mungo's Janus Thickey Ward!"

A moment later, they were spinning away as well.

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Eleven

Chapter 11 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Eleven

Arthur found Snape pacing up and down the hallway outside a room filled with curtained off cubicles.

"How is she?" he asked as he fell into step beside Snape.

"The Healers are with her," Snape said. "Her dizziness has abated, and her short-term memory loss appears to have improved as well."

"She's going to be all right, then," Arthur said in a relieved tone.

"No thanks to me."

"You probably saved her life! I was across the room my spell might not have reached Sybill before she finished her own incantation."

Snape stopped pacing and glared at Arthur. "I should have disarmed the bitch before she ever had a chance to raise her wand against Hermione."

"You couldn't have known that she would attempt to use the Killing Curse."

"No one knows better than I do that the actions of a madman can never be predicted. As tiresome as he sometimes was, Moody had the right of it when he preached 'constant vigilance'. I was careless, and my carelessness could have resulted in my wife's death."

"You and Hermione really are married, then?" Arthur asked.

"Yes, we are," Snape snapped out. "Sybill may have destroyed one of the copies of our Certificate of Marriage, but there are others including the one that was validated and filed by your own Special Registrar. We were married in Cyprus three days ago."

"But Sybill showed me the Declaration you and she filed within days after the lists were published," Arthur said. "She was ~~giddy~~ at the idea of marrying you."

"And how did she explain why my name continued to appear each day on the list of eligible wizards?"

"She said that the two of you wanted to keep things quiet."

Snape made a sound of disgust.

"She even commiserated with me about Ron not making the list," Arthur continued. "She said she would have made sure to match him with Hermione if he had."

"I wouldn't have married him."

At the sound of her voice, Snape swung around to see Hermione standing just a few feet away.

"Hermione!"

He stepped in front of her, and then he placed his hands on her upper arms and peered down at her.

"What are you doing out of bed?" he asked.

"I don't need to be in bed; the Healers said I could go home."

"I think you should stay ... you may have a concussion ..."

"I don't have a concussion."

"... or neurological damage ..."

"All the scans were negative."

"... internal bleeding ..."

Hermione actually stamped her foot.

"Can you hear yourself?" she asked.

"I'm merely expressing my concern."

"And I appreciate it, but I'm fine. I wasn't even hit by a curse; I was caught in the nimbus of a Stupefying Spell ..."

"Two Stupefying Spells," Snape interrupted.

"All right two Stupefying Spells. The number doesn't matter, the effect does, and I didn't even lose consciousness. The Healers checked me out, and I'm fine. I just want to go home."

"You suffered memory loss."

"I remember everything now."

"You were ranting ..."

"Ranting?"

"Rambling ... off your head."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Off my head? What did I say?"

"You don't remember? That just proves my point about your memory loss. You need to stay here for observation."

"Oh, wait ... I do recall you saying earlier that I was off my head ... right after I said you smelled nice."

"She's caught you out, Severus."

Severus turned to Arthur and scowled. Now that he knew Hermione was all right, he remembered that Arthur Weasley was one of the reasons he and Hermione found themselves in their current circumstance.

"Why are you still here, Arthur? Don't you have duties? Some data to manipulate? Some cover-up to instigate?"

"I have plenty to do ... especially now," Arthur said with a sigh. "I just wanted to make sure that Hermione was all right. And, unlike you, I can see that she is. Aren't you, dear?"

"Yes, I am, thank you, Minister," Hermione said a bit stiffly.

"Minister?" He shook his head sadly. "You used to call me Arthur, or at least Mr. Weasley. Though I don't suppose I deserve better."

Hermione didn't reply. She turned away from Arthur and addressed Severus. "Will you take me home now, Severus?"

"Hermione, wait!"

Hermione hesitated, but then she turned back.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to need your help," Arthur said in a pleading tone. "And yours as well, Severus."

"We've been offering our help for years," Snape said. "You've rebuffed us at every turn. Why should we help you now?"

Mindful of the people milling about, Arthur lowered his voice before he spoke again. "Can we discuss this in private?"

"I'm taking Hermione home. If she's well enough, we'll come to your office tomorrow."

"I'm going to call the Wizengamot into special session as soon as possible in the morning if I can reach enough members. I'd be grateful if we could talk tonight."

"I told you I'm taking Hermione home," Snape insisted.

"I'm not asking for myself."

Hermione tried to remain unmoved, but the look of abject misery on Arthur Weasley's face was more than she could bear. She touched a hand to Snape's arm.

"Maybe we should."

"You need to rest."

"Neither one of us is going to rest until this is settled, and you know it."

Snape scowled, but he conceded her point.

"Very well, then," he said. "But I must insist that you come to us, Arthur, so that Hermione can at least be in comfortable surroundings while we discuss the situation."

"I understand."

"I'll adjust my wards so you can Floo in. Give us a few minutes to get settled and then come through," Snape instructed.

"Thank you," Arthur said with relief. Snape nodded, and then he draped an arm across Hermione's shoulders and led her toward the Floo.

Almost forty minutes passed before Snape's Floo activated, and Arthur Weasley stepped out of the shimmering green flames.

"How nice of you to join us," Snape said in an icy tone.

"I was waylaid by Rita Skeeter," Arthur said as he brushed off his robes.

"The press has got hold of this already, then," Hermione said from the couch. At her husband's insistence, she was in a semi-reclining position with a pillow behind her head and a blanket over her lap.

"Several people entered the Office of the Special Registrar before we left," Snape said. "Any one of them could have contacted the press."

"I admonished them not to discuss what they'd seen with anyone."

"You're living in a fantasy world if you thought they'd follow that edict," Snape said. "The Ministry has a long history of security problems."

"And there were plenty of people at St. Mungo's who could've contacted Rita Skeeter," Hermione added.

Arthur sighed. "I suppose I'll have to issue a statement."

"And what will you say?" Snape demanded. "That an insane charlatan masquerading as a seer managed to pull the wool over the eyes of the entire wizarding world, up to and including the Wizengamot and even the Minister for Magic himself?"

"I can't just let speculation run wild. I'll have to explain things."

Snape shook his head.

"The truth has to come out, Severus," Hermione said.

"I agree. But at the same time, there has to be a plan in place to correct those *things*, else you'll have riots on your hands. A grave injustice has been inflicted upon the populace. Once the details of Sybill's scheme become known, they'll be out for blood; and if they can't have hers, they'll have yours instead."

Arthur straightened and lifted his chin before he spoke. "I intend to assume full responsibility for what's happened. I don't deserve to be Minister for Magic, but I won't wait to be ignominiously drummed out of office as Fudge was; I'll be tendering my resignation tomorrow."

"And I'll be urging the Wizengamot to accept it," Snape replied harshly, "but not tomorrow. You need to remain in office until this mess is cleared away. Besides, I doubt you'll find anyone in the wizarding world who'll want your job once this news breaks."

He paused a moment, and when he spoke again, his tone was less hostile. "Arthur, how did you allow this to happen?"

"I didn't know that she had altered the data. I swear I didn't know." Arthur was pacing up and down the carpet that covered the small space between the fireplace and the couch in Snape's parlour.

"You would have known if you had taken even one of the messages I tried to send to you," Hermione snapped out. "Why didn't you?"

"What messages?"

"I sent at least a dozen in the past few months alone. Are you saying you never received any of them?"

"The last message I got from you was at least a year ago," Arthur insisted, "and it had nothing to do with toxic magic or birth rates."

"And I don't suppose you knew that I was trying to contact you, either, did you?" Snape asked. "Or Filius Flitwick?"

Arthur shook his head.

"She must have re-directed everything," Hermione said.

"She wanted to make very sure that the new law was the only option," Snape said.

"Were you aware at all of the work that the three of us have been doing?" Hermione asked Arthur.

"Sybill mentioned something once," he replied. "She said potions and charms were a waste of time; she said the toxic magic was immune to such mundane interventions."

Snape sneered. "When did Sybill Trelawney become a potions master; and why would you think that she knew more about charms than Filius or Hermione? Wouldn't the logical choice have been to pursue *all* avenues in search of a solution?"

"I regret my ... inaction."

"Unfortunately, your regret isn't going to help all the poor bastards who've been forced into marriage over the last three months, is it?"

Arthur was wringing his hands and shaking his head. "She seemed so convincing ..."

Snape, who understood how an otherwise rational person could be seduced by the rhetoric of a charismatic lunatic, finally relented. "What's done is done; now we have to work on its undoing."

"The Wizengamot will undoubtedly repeal the law once they understand how we've all been duped," Arthur said. "The forced marriages will be annulled or divorces granted ..."

"The Wizengamot can't just issue a blanket annulment of every marriage that's taken place in the last three months," Hermione protested.

"Why not?"

"Because, at least in a majority of the marriages, there are probably other considerations by now."

Arthur looked puzzled, and now it was Snape shaking his head.

"Are you really as naïve as you seem? Consummation of the marriages was required, weekly sexual activity was mandated, and contraceptive charms and potions were expressly prohibited. Since it appears that Sybill didn't alter the results of the fertility tests, the logical consequences of such activity are ..."

"Babies ..." Arthur said with dawning comprehension.

"Hundreds of babies, most likely," Snape said. "And every one of them required to be born in wedlock."

"Oh, my ..."

"Every marriage will need to be reviewed individually," Hermione said. "Every woman will have to get a pregnancy test before an annulment can be granted."

Snape shook his head again. "Even before that, the Wizengamot must void the provisions requiring weekly sexual activity and prohibiting contraceptives. Perhaps a few of the recently married couples can avoid finding themselves facing parenthood."

"Well, since the whole point of the law was for couples to produce children ..." Arthur began.

"Actually, it seems the whole point of the law was for Sybill Trelawney to trap Severus into marriage and to punish me for some imagined insult," Hermione said.

Arthur sat down heavily, as though the weight of the situation was just now becoming obvious. "It seems preposterous that she created such an elaborate scheme with that sole purpose in mind. How did she know you wouldn't marry someone else?"

"I think she would have done exactly what she did," Snape said. "She would have claimed the Declaration was never received and proceeded to engage herself to me. I don't believe she thought it would be necessary, however. I'm hardly marriage material."

"And I hadn't even had a date in years," Hermione added. "I was rather soured on men after my last go-round with Ron."

Arthur looked at Hermione. "I had always hoped that you and Ron would work out your differences. When Ron didn't make the list, I resigned myself to the fact that you'd never be together. I must confess, however, that I was shocked when Sybill showed me the Declaration that you and Mundungus filed ..."

"Hermione *never* filed a Declaration of Betrothal with Fletcher, any more than I filed one with Sybill Trelawney."

"I believed that you had, especially since they were both listed as voluntary rather than arranged Declarations."

"How could you think that I would willingly marry Mundungus Fletcher?"

Arthur shook his head. "I don't know, but I didn't question the legitimacy of the Declarations."

"I'm sure Sybill made certain you didn't," Snape replied. "The fact of the matter is that we sent in our paperwork on the last day of filing, but the *Special Coordinator* claimed it was never received. We tried to re-file, but we were informed that other matches had already been made for us."

Snape adjusted the blanket that was draped across Hermione's lap, and then he sat down on the edge of the couch next to her. Once he was settled, he spoke again.

"Filius Flitwick sent an affidavit attesting to the fact that he had witnessed our Declaration, and he was threatened with Azkaban for his trouble. We were unable to extricate ourselves from our forced betrothals in spite of numerous attempts. We were advised that our only option was to exercise our Right of Exemption. Since neither one of us was willing to give up our magic, we were left with no choice but to go elsewhere and then present ourselves at the Ministry with our marriage a *fait accompli*.

"Fletcher was quite willing to walk away from the arrangement. It's obvious that he was coerced, whether by someone Sybill Imperiused, or by Sybill herself with the help of some Polyjuice Potion, we may never know."

"Does it really matter?" Hermione asked.

"No. All that matters is resolving the situation as quickly as possible," Snape said. "Have you arranged for the special session of the Wizengamot?"

"I've contacted several members, and they've contacted others. The special session will convene at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning," Arthur said. "Will you testify, Hermione? If we can show them the correct data ..."

"Apparently I didn't have the correct data," she said. "I based my conclusions on the birth rate information released by the Ministry or rather, the corrupted data released by Sybill Trelawney. I have no idea what the true statistics are!"

"We have to go to her office," Snape said. "She wouldn't have destroyed the original birth records. She would have needed to refer to them every time she released new, false information. The originals have to be there."

"She'll have everything warded," Hermione warned.

Snape merely arched his brow.

"Although I'm quite sure you'll have no trouble getting through whatever paltry wards she may have erected," Hermione finished smoothly.

"I'm quite sure, as well," Snape replied with a smirk.

"Cheeky bugger," Hermione muttered, but she was smiling.

After Arthur left, Snape and Hermione shared a small meal, and then Snape insisted that Hermione go to bed.

"Since you're adamant about accompanying Arthur and me on our foray into Sybill's office tomorrow," he said as he tucked the blanket up under her chin, "you need to rest tonight."

"Did Arthur say how she was doing? I saw her fall, but then things got a bit fuzzy."

"Arthur took her to St. Mungo's only moments after I went there with you."

"And?" Hermione asked around a wide yawn.

"She's raving. The Healers had to give her a Calming Draught, and they are not optimistic about her prognosis."

"Now that we know to what extremes she went to arrange her marriage to you, her violent reaction is understandable."

"Understandable? She tried to kill you."

"In her own sick, twisted way, she felt she was justified."

"How could she think that I would marry her after she murdered you?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't think we'll ever know what she was thinking."

"Probably not," Snape agreed. "Given her present condition, it's likely she'll be keeping Gilderoy Lockhart company for the rest of her life."

"Better there than Azkaban," Hermione said, and then she yawned again.

"You're far more forgiving than I," Snape murmured, as he reached out and touched her forehead gently.

"I do so enjoy serving as a good example. And I don't have a fever," she added as she captured Snape's hand and lifted it away from her forehead.

Snape had the grace to look a bit chagrined that his ruse had been so easily seen through, in spite of the fact that Hermione's eyes were drooping with fatigue. "A few hours ago you were looking forward to creating a scandal," he reminded her.

"And wasn't that a grand success?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Oh, yes ... I can hardly wait to see the headlines tomorrow."

Hermione had no comment as she had fallen asleep.

Author's Note: This story was written for the Potter Place's Variety Challenge. This is the prompt I chose: Something Old Revisit a once popular challenge. I chose to revisit the Marriage Law Challenge, but I've placed the story in a post-DH timeline.

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Twelve

As it turned out, the door to Sybill's office swung open without protest when Arthur, in his capacity as Minister for Magic, ordered it to. When Snape murmured a simple Revealing Spell, a small filing cabinet appeared next to the desk. It wasn't even locked, and the files inside the top two drawers were in neat, alphabetical order.

Snape pulled out the folder marked 'Vital Statistics' and opened it on the desk.

Hermione pulled open the bottom drawer, which was crammed with a large number of parchment rolls.

"Look," she said as she pointed, "there's my challenge! And I see several others, as well. And lots of messages none of them addressed to Sybill, I might add." She reached into the drawer and picked up several of the tightly rolled parchments.

"Oh, these are nothing. We'll deal with these later," she said a moment later. She put them back into the drawer and closed it.

"Won't we need to show those to the Wizengamot?" Arthur asked as he pulled the drawer back open. As soon as he picked up one of the parchments, however, he dropped it back into the drawer. "No, we won't need these."

"Aren't those challenges to the new law?" Snape asked as he lifted his eyes from the file he was perusing.

"Are they? I didn't think they were important," Hermione said. She shook her head slightly. "Why didn't I think they were important?"

"Weren't they adverts?" Arthur asked in a puzzled tone. "I thought they were adverts."

Snape pulled the drawer open and peered inside. He could clearly see that most of the parchments were addressed to the Chief Warlock or to Arthur, and that many of them had a subject line that stated the purpose of the document was to challenge the new law.

"They've been bewitched," Snape said. "Probably some variant of a side-tracking or procrastination spell."

"Are you sure they're not adverts?" Arthur asked as he reached again for one of the scrolls.

"Wait," Snape said as he aimed his wand at the parchment. "*Finite Incantatum*." The parchment quivered slightly. "Do you still think it's an advert?"

Arthur picked it up. "It's addressed to me," he said. He unrolled the parchment and skimmed it. "It's from Hermione. She's asking for a meeting to discuss charms and potions being developed to counteract the toxic magic."

He dropped the scroll back into the drawer and raised his eyes to meet Snape's. "I never saw this message."

"I'm sure you didn't," Snape agreed. He waved his wand over the other scrolls in the drawer.

"All of these will need to be looked at now," he said.

"I can't believe I didn't think she might have bewitched them," Hermione muttered as she began sorting through the pile of scrolls.

"Why would you?" Snape asked. "If I hadn't seen you and Arthur react so oddly I probably wouldn't have suspected that the scrolls had been tampered with."

Hermione nodded and continued sorting the scrolls.

Arthur was skimming through messages that had been addressed to him from Hermione, Snape, Filius, and dozens of other people.

"Bloody hell," Hermione said angrily as she slapped a parchment down on the desk.

"What is it?" Snape asked.

"It's our Declaration of Betrothal the one the Ministry 'never received'!"

"The Wizengamot will need to see all of these," Snape said. "But more importantly, they need to see the unaltered birth statistics."

"Has there been a decline in the birth rates?" Arthur asked as he leaned over the parchments Snape had unrolled on the desk.

"There was actually a substantial rise in the six to twenty-four month period after the war ended. This is a natural phenomenon, and would have corrected itself gradually. As the effects of the toxic magic began to spread, the birth rates declined, but only slightly. It appears that most normal, healthy individuals weren't too seriously affected by the Dark Lord's final curse. And, as the toxic magic faded, the birth rates returned to normal pre-war levels, except in the places where Sybill placed containment charms notably in areas with a larger than average wizarding population, which she could readily monitor. Areas outside the city actually maintained a slight increase in the birth rate. But because she intercepted all the reports about birth and death rates that were sent to the Ministry's Division of Vital Statistics, she was able to manufacture a crisis where none existed."

"What about our work?" Hermione asked. "How did she reverse the intent of the contraceptive charms and potions?"

"She didn't. I found her journal in the same folder as the Vital Statistics reports. She's had a Confundus Charm on the three of us for years."

"How did she manage that?" Arthur asked.

"It was over Spinner's End, actually. She made a point of passing the house, just outside my wards, at least once a week to renew the charm. It was a rather broad, encompassing spell that caused anyone working inside to misinterpret data. Had we moved our experiments to another location, we wouldn't have had a problem."

"Unbelievable."

"When Sybill lost control, the charm failed."

"What about Calvin and his poor wife?" Hermione asked. "You told me that he said his wife used a contraceptive potion every night, yet they have six children."

"Alas, it appears poor Effie is one of a very small minority of witches who are resistant to the effects of birth control potions; though why it took seven pregnancies to make that discovery, I'll never know. I've made arrangements with Calvin to meet with them and teach them some basic contraceptive charms, which are less likely to fail than potions are. Their family should be complete when their seventh 'bun' emerges from the oven."

"The bottom line is that the wizarding world is *not* 'on the brink of extinction' and never has been," Snape concluded. "The extraordinary measures implemented by the Wizengamot are certainly not required."

"Who would have believed that someone who appeared as scatterbrained and ineffective as Sybill did could have conceived of and implemented such a scheme and maintained it for more than five years?" Arthur mused.

"Genius and madness are often two sides of the same coin," Hermione said.

"She didn't appear to exhibit either side in any great abundance," he said.

"Sometimes the coin stands on edge," Snape put in.

"Look at the time," Hermione said sharply. "We've got to get this stuff upstairs." She was gathering scrolls and tying them together as she spoke.

Arthur conjured a box and tossed a number of scrolls inside. "Once the Wizengamot goes through all these and sees the true birth and death statistics, I'm sure they'll do the right thing."

Snape picked up the file marked Vital Statistics and nodded. "One can only hope that reason and truth will be more impelling than malignant and fraudulent prognostications."

"Not to mention they'll be making decisions without my misguided influence," Arthur added glumly.

"You weren't the only one she used the Imperius on," Hermione consoled him.

"I'm afraid that's little comfort, but thank you," Arthur replied.

They exited Sybill's office, and Arthur closed and warded the door. "I'll have to come back and search through every inch later. Let's hope there are no other surprises hidden here."

As they approached Arthur's office, an aide rushed up.

"Minister, the members of the Wizengamot are all here. And there's a bloody gaggle of reporters trying to gain access to the courtroom as well. Do you want me to call the Aurors to keep them out?"

Arthur swallowed hard. He looked like a man about to walk to his own execution. "No, Edwards," he said as he straightened his shoulders. "Let them in."

Edwards nodded and started to turn back the way he'd come.

"Wait!" Snape called out.

"Minister?" Edwards asked.

"Wait here," Arthur said to his aide as he opened the door to his office and gestured Snape and Hermione inside. "I'll give you instructions in a moment."

"Of course, sir."

"Is the Wizengamot aware of what transpired yesterday?" Snape asked as soon as Arthur followed them into his office and closed the door.

"I spoke with a few members. They know that there's a ... a problem with the new law."

"You need to brief them completely before you allow the press in. If the Wizengamot can't answer their questions, they'll fill in the blanks themselves."

"You saw the headlines in the papers this morning. Nothing they'll hear could be worse than the rumours and lies they've already printed."

Snape nodded grimly. The headlines that morning had been lurid and had ranged from the ridiculous and absurd (Hermione and Sybill had duelled over the last remaining eligible bachelor) to the frightening and macabre (the Dark Lord's followers had staged a bloody breakout from Azkaban and were even now on their way to avenge their master's death). None of the stories, however, had even hinted at the true nature of the events that had taken place in the marriage office or the actions that had precipitated them.

"You're right," Snape said. "But there needs to be some sort of plan, however rudimentary, in place before the details of Sybill's manipulations are released."

Arthur seemed about to protest, but then he sighed and nodded in agreement. "Rita Skeeter has been trying to contact me all night. Perhaps I should speak to her."

"Rita Skeeter is a sensationalist," Hermione protested.

"Yes, but her readers believe whatever she prints. If we can get her on our side ..."

"She has only one 'side' her own."

"If I agree to give her an exclusive interview, she'll jump at the chance. I'll stipulate that she can't use a Quick Quotes Quill and that I have final approval before the interview is published."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Arthur," Snape said. "She'll chew you up and spit you out."

"I expect she will," Arthur agreed. "But she'll also spit out the information we need to get to the people."

He opened the door and indicated that Edwards should come inside.

"Show the esteemed members of the press corps to an empty room well away from the Wizengamot. Tell them that I'll be issuing a statement and answering questions in three hours." Arthur glanced at his watch. "It's nearly eleven; have tea and biscuits served."

"Yes, sir."

"Is Rita Skeeter among the members of the press in attendance?"

"She's the one insisting the loudest to be let into the courtroom," Edwards replied.

"Wait an hour, and then ask Miss Skeeter to join me here."

"Be discreet, Edwards," Snape put in.

Edwards looked to Arthur, who nodded.

"Of course, sir," Edwards replied and backed out the door.

The headlines in *The Daily Prophet* on Thursday morning were even more lurid than they'd been the day before. The headlines, and the stories that followed, were, however, much closer to the truth.

'MARRIAGE AND BABY LAW' TO BE REPEALED!

"A sick and misguided mind has perpetrated an unprecedented hoax upon the wizarding world," Minister for Magic announces.

By Rita Skeeter

The events that took place at the Ministry's 'Marriage Office' on Tuesday afternoon have been explained.

Or have they? The official Ministry statement declares that Sybill Trelawney, using a combination of false prophecy, data manipulation, and the Imperius Curse, managed to convince the Ministry and the Wizengamot that the wizarding world was in imminent danger of extinction due to falling birth rates. The response of the Ministry and Wizengamot was to enact the statute known as the Marriage and Baby Law. The idea that one person especially one with the questionable abilities of Sybill Trelawney could single-handedly drive the political machine of the Ministry along such a path is suspect, to say the least.

This reporter, in an unrelenting effort to uncover the truth, confronted the current Minister for Magic to demand an explanation. In an exclusive interview, Arthur Weasley filled in some of the details that the official statement left out. He also outlined the steps that will be taken to redress the wrongs inflicted upon the witches and wizards who were forced to comply with the statute.

What follows is a word-for-word transcript of my historic interview with Minister for Magic, Arthur Weasley.

Rita Skeeter: Good afternoon, Minister

Arthur Weasley: Good afternoon, Miss Skeeter

RS: I want to thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.

AW: The Ministry has nothing to hide.

RS: There are those who would disagree with that statement.

AW: I'm sure there are, but that's the truth none the less. Ask your questions.

RS: There was an altercation at the Ministry yesterday. According to my sources, Sybill Trelawney tried to cast the Killing Curse upon Hermione Granger. Is that true?

AW: Yes. Fortunately, she was disarmed before she could complete the incantation.

RS: Was Miss Trelawney acting in her official capacity as Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages?

AW: She was not. Miss Trelawney believed herself betrothed, and when she arrived at the Marriage Office and discovered that Miss Granger was married to the man she thought she was to wed, she, Miss Trelawney ... reacted badly.

RS: Is it true that Hermione Granger is now married to none other than the infamous former Death Eater, Severus Snape?

AW: Miss Granger is married to the decorated war hero, Severus Snape.

RS: How did those two come to be married? And why would Sybill Trelawney believe she was to be married to Snape?

AW: Miss Trelawney filed a false Declaration of Betrothal. Mr. Snape protested the Declaration, but as part of her scheme, Mr. Snape's objection to the proposed marriage was overruled. As to how and why Miss Granger and Mr. Snape came to be married, that's a question you'll have to ask them. All I can say is that their marriage has been legally recognised by the Ministry. Their validated Marriage Certificate is on file.

RS: How did Sybill Trelawney come to be appointed the Special Coordinator for Ministry Approved and Arranged Marriages?

AW: Miss Trelawney's appointment was approved by the Wizengamot after she presented evidence that the Dark Lord had, in a final attempt to destroy the wizarding world, released a cloud of 'toxic magic' which would result in the inability of witches and wizards to produce enough children to maintain a viable level of population growth.

RS: What evidence did she produce?

AW: A false prophecy as well as birth and death statistics. They showed that more witches and wizards were dying each year than there were babies being born. Her projections indicated that wizardkind was dying.

RS: And you believed her?

AW: We all believed her, Miss Skeeter. Even you believed her. As I recall, you published several articles urging the Ministry to take action, urging the Wizengamot to enact the C.R.A.P. statute, and urging the public to embrace and comply with the new law.

RS: Yes, well, apparently Miss Trelawney's talents, especially with the Imperius, were more refined than we thought.

AW: Indeed they were.

RS: Where is Sybill Trelawney now? Is she being detained here at the Ministry or has she already been transferred to Azkaban?

AW: Sybill Trelawney is currently being treated at St. Mungo's.

RS: Didn't she admit to using the Imperius? And didn't she attempt to use another Unforgivable against Hermione Granger. Surely she'll face charges.

AW: At this time she has been deemed mentally unfit to stand trial. Her status will be re-evaluated in thirty days.

RS: But her scheme...

AW: ... has been exposed. Now steps must be taken to correct the wrongs.

RS: Ah, yes, now we get to the heart of the matter, don't we? How, exactly, will the Ministry and the Wizengamot address this issue? And when?

AW: The process has already begun. The Wizengamot met in special session earlier today. The Conjugal Required Accelerated Procreation Statute more commonly referred to as the Marriage and Baby Law will soon be repealed, although some requirements of the law have already been voided.

RS: Which requirements?

AW: There will be no further arranged marriages. All witches and wizards who chose to exercise the statute's Right of Exemption will have their wands returned and their magic restored. Most notably, the sections of the law which require weekly sexual congress and prohibit the use of contraceptive charms and potions have already been vacated. Sexual activity is a private matter between individuals, as is the choice about whether to have children and when. The Ministry and Wizengamot will no longer be peeking into bedrooms, as it were.

RS: Why wasn't the entire law repealed immediately?

AW: Repealing the entire law would nullify all the marriages that took place under the statute.

RS: Surely those marriages are illegal. They were coerced. Doesn't the Ministry have a legal and moral obligation to the witches and wizards who were forced into marriage?

AW: We do, and we intend to fulfil those legal and moral obligations. After much deliberation, however, we've decided that we have a greater legal and moral obligation to any children who may be born as a result of the statute. We mustn't forget that this was the Marriage and **Baby** Law. Many of the couples who married under the new law, especially in the first few weeks, are probably already expecting a child.

RS: And because they obeyed the law, they are to be further punished by being forced to remain in an illegal marriage?

AW: Miss Skeeter, when is the last time you heard of a child being born out of wedlock in the wizarding world?

RS: I ...I'm ... I don't believe I ever have.

AW: Precisely. The wizarding world expects ... no, demands ... that all children be born into the protective relationship of marriage. The children who were conceived as a result of the new law will have the same protection. Their status **must be** and **will be** protected.

RS: How will you accomplish this, Minister?

AW: Each couple married under the new law may request the opportunity to present themselves before a member of the Wizengamot for a hearing. A simple diagnostic spell, cast by a Healer, will determine if a child is on the way. If there is no pregnancy, the marriage will be annulled or a Bill of Divorcement will be granted immediately.

RS: And if there is a baby on the way?

AW: Instead of an annulment, a Bill of Divorcement will be issued with the effective date of the dissolution to be thirty days after the birth of the child. All children born to parents who were married under the C.R.A.P. Statute will receive monetary support from the Ministry until they are of legal age. Furthermore, should a couple decide that the responsibility of parenthood is not one they wish to assume, adoptive parents will be sought out.

RS: So the Ministry intends to buy its way out of the situation? Do you believe that money will make this problem go away?

AW: No amount of money can compensate the people who have been affected by this unjust law. No one can change what's happened. The only thing we can do is move forward with the best interests of the children our primary consideration.

RS: How long do you expect this process to take?

AW: The Chief Warlock has already assigned members of the Wizengamot to preside over the hearings. They could start as early as tomorrow, but certainly by Monday or Tuesday at the latest. We hope to have every case heard within ninety days. Six months after that, the last potential child should have been born, and the statute will be officially abolished thirty days after that.

RS: Minister, my sources indicate that several members of the Wizengamot are claiming that it was your impassioned pleas that finally convinced them to adopt the C.R.A.P. Statute. Now that it's become known that you were little more than a pawn in the diabolical scheme of an unstable lunatic, how will you defend yourself against those who will demand that you step down as Minister for Magic?

AW: Sybill Trelawney used the Imperius Curse against me and against several members of the Wizengamot. I can't speak for them, but I won't use that as an excuse for my own poor judgement. I've already tendered my resignation.

RS: Thus leaving this mess for someone else to clean up.

AW: Not at all; I intend to see this through to the end, Miss Skeeter. My resignation will become effective the same day the statute is repealed. And now, you must excuse me; I may be a lame duck Minister, but I still have duties.

With that shocking bombshell, the Minister for Magic stood and left the room. This reporter attempted to reach the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, but he was unavailable for comment. St. Mungo's, citing their policy on patient confidentiality, refused to even confirm or deny that Sybill Trelawney had been admitted to their facility. Requests for comments sent to Severus Snape and Hermione Granger were returned marked 'Undeliverable'.

While some questions have been answered, many, many others have not. This reporter has never shirked from her journalist responsibility to seek out and uncover the truth, so rest assured my quest for answers will continue.

Look for further reports soon.

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Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 13

The Wizengamot has finally done it! They've gone and passed the Marriage and Baby Law. Neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger is happy with the choice made for them by the Ministry, so they hatch an elaborate scheme to thwart the new law--by marrying each other!

Chapter Thirteen

"Rita Skeeter wouldn't know the truth if it jumped up and bit her on her scrawny, little arse," Snape muttered as he tossed aside his copy of *The Daily Prophet* and picked up his mug of tea.

"I thought Arthur did well," Hermione said as she spread marmalade on a piece of toast. "He managed to get the gist of the Wizengamot's plan out there without too many embellishments by Rita Skeeter."

"She wanted the interview badly enough to agree to his terms. He stood up and took responsibility for his part in the debacle, and for that he's to be commended. The Chief Warlock and most of the members of the Wizengamot scuttled away like cockroaches in the light as soon as the special session ended. I'm not sure Arthur's actions will be enough to mollify the teeming masses who will be clamouring for his head, however."

Before Hermione could comment any further, there was a tapping at the window. When she approached, she saw an owl sitting on the ledge, preening itself while it waited for someone to open the window.

"I thought you'd redirected all our messages?" she asked as she turned toward Snape.

"Only those from the press," he replied as he got to his feet and joined Hermione.

Done with its preening, the owl glared at Snape and Hermione through the pane. It tapped impatiently at the glass and held up its leg where a tightly rolled parchment with an official Ministry seal was tied.

"Now what does the bloody Ministry want from me?" Snape snarled. He opened the window and snatched the parchment, nearly knocking the owl off the ledge as he did so.

"Ow!" he yelped as he pulled his hand back inside. "That ruddy owl bit me!"

"You nearly sent it flying," Hermione said reasonably.

"It's an owl," Snape said in a prickly tone as he sucked his injured finger. "It's supposed to be sent flying."

"Not like a Quaffle hit by a Bludger, it's not," Hermione retorted. She looked around, but didn't see the customary jar of owl treats anywhere. She picked up her abandoned piece of toast and held it out to the owl.

"Sorry, this is all I have," she said.

The owl blinked at her, and then lifted its beak haughtily. With a derisive hoot it spread its wings and lifted into the air.

"I think I insulted it," Hermione said as she tossed the crust out the window. She shut the window and turned back to see Snape scowling fiercely at the parchment he'd unrolled.

"So what *does* the bloody Ministry want from you?" she asked coming to stand beside him. She reached for the parchment, but he held it away from her.

"Our annulment hearing is scheduled for two o'clock this afternoon."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. "Annulment hearing? I thought that since our marriage was magically witnessed the Wizengamot couldn't annul it."

"They can't," he said as rubbed the side of his neck. "They can, however, grant a divorce. Happily, it appears this farce of a marriage will be over even sooner than we anticipated."

"Happily? But, Severus ..."

"I'll expect you to have your personal belongings out of here before the hearing."

"My personal belongings?"

"And, as there's no longer a need for us to work together, I'll expect you to have your workspace cleared out as well."

"Severus, please, we need to discuss ..."

"It's little late for discussion, isn't it?" he asked, cutting off her words. "Now, if you'll excuse me." He gave an exaggerated little bow. "I have things I need to do. But don't worry, I'll be at the Ministry on time ... just as you requested!"

"I didn't request a hearing!"

"According to this," he shouted as he held up the parchment, "you did!"

And then with a loud crack, he was gone.

Hermione sat down heavily. An hour before, they'd been in bed, making love and laughing together. She'd been happy, content, satisfied, and she thought he'd been, as well. She'd thought they'd come to care for each other, to trust each other at least. She knew that she hadn't requested a hearing to end her marriage. She knew that there had to be some kind of mistake. But Severus hadn't even stopped to consider that possibility. He had immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. He, apparently, had no desire to remain married to her. He was *happily* looking forward to being single again, to having her out of his life.

She wanted to scream, to rage, to rail at the unfairness of it all. But none of that would do any good. She could refuse to give her permission for the divorce; even Snape had conceded that point in the note he'd left for her on their wedding day, but what good would that do? Would that make her husband trust her or want her?

No, it wouldn't.

Hermione sighed and got to her feet. If Severus wanted her belongings, and her, gone, then gone they would be.

She conjured some boxes and began throwing things into them.

Hermione was sitting on one of the hard, backless benches that lined the corridor outside Courtroom Ten with her head down, and her eyes on the cracked floor tile. She was lost in her own thoughts, and so she jumped a bit when someone touched her shoulder.

"Hey, Hermione."

"Ron!"

"Long time, huh?" he asked. He was shifting from foot to foot. "How've you been?"

"I'm fine," Hermione replied mechanically.

"That's good ... good."

Hermione looked past him, hoping to see Severus.

"So, Hermione."

"Yes?" Hermione reluctantly drew her attention back to Ron.

"I heard you got married."

"It was all over the papers, Ron."

"Yeah ... well, I'm not. Married, that is."

"At the moment, you mean," Hermione said.

"Well, you won't be soon, either, right?"

"How do you know that?"

"Like you said, it was in the papers. You know, about what Trelawney did, and how the Wizengamot's going to have hearings and annul all the marriages," Ron said.

"So, you just happened to be here today?" Hermione's eyes narrowed with suspicion as she stared up at Ron.

"Yeah, sure ... uh ... well ... not exactly." Ron stammered out. The only time he'd ever been able to lie successfully to Hermione was when he'd sworn wouldn't cheat on her again.

"Then why, exactly, are you here?" Hermione demanded as she got to her feet.

"Uh ... you know Percy works here at the Ministry, right?"

When Hermione nodded, he spoke again. "He told me about the hearings, and I sort of asked him to put in a request for you, to get your hearing scheduled right away instead of waiting."

"What?"

"At first he didn't want to, but he owed me a favour ..."

"You can tell Percy that I'll be filing a complaint against him! Ministry personnel aren't supposed to discuss Ministry business with outsiders."

"I'm not an *outsider*! I'm his brother."

"When it comes to official Ministry business, you're an outsider. My privacy has been violated."

"Crickey, Hermione, he was just trying to help you."

"How could either of you think that scheduling this hearing, *without my permission*, would be helping me?"

"We both felt bad when you had to marry Snape."

"I didn't *have* to marry anyone; it was my choice," Hermione said coolly.

"Giving up your magic wasn't much of a choice, was it?" Ron replied. "And neither was marrying Dung. But once your marriage is annulled, and now that the fertility requirement is gone, we can get married."

Hermione scowled at him. "Did you say 'we', as in you and me?"

"And I thought you were the clever one. Who else would I mean?"

"I'm not interested in marrying you, Ron. I thought I finally made that clear last year."

"I know you were upset with me when you saw me with ... well, you know."

"All too well," Hermione muttered.

"But I know you didn't mean all those things you said. You love me; you've always loved me."

He smiled that charming, boyish, almost shy smile the one that had once had the power to make Hermione's knees weak. Now all it did was make her angry.

"I used to love you," Hermione corrected. "I haven't loved you for a very long time. And as for my being upset well, you have a rare talent for understatement if you think upset covers it."

"I don't know what the big deal is ..." Ron began, and then he backed away as Hermione stepped closer to him and began jabbing her finger into his chest.

"You don't know what the big deal is? Is that what you said?"

Jab.

"I walked into the flat we shared ..."

Jab

"... Into the bedroom we shared ..."

Jab. Jab.

"... and found you *fucking* someone else in the *bed* we shared!"

Jab. Jab. Jab.

"It was just sex," Ron said as he rubbed the painful spot on his chest. "And you don't ever *like* sex!"

"Maybe I'd've liked it well enough if it lasted more than two minutes!" Hermione was nearly shouting now.

"Keep it down, would you?" Ron's face had gone red. "She didn't mean anything to me, you know. You're the one I love."

"You married her a week later, but she didn't mean anything to you? You're disgusting!"

Ron's face flushed an even deeper red. "Not nearly as disgusting as Snape! You're lucky I still want you after he's had his greasy hands on you!"

"You aren't fit to breathe the same air he does!"

And before she even realised she was going to do it, she raised her arm and slapped him.

Ron's mouth twisted into an ugly line. He pulled his wand, but before he could raise it, it flew from his hand.

"What the fuck!"

He twisted around to follow his wand, and discovered his father standing a few feet down the corridor. Arthur had Ron's wand clutched in his fist.

"Were you about to raise your wand against the woman you claim to love?" Arthur asked in a fierce tone.

"She hit me! You saw that, didn't you?"

"She slapped your face," Arthur said. "And judging by what I overheard, I'd say the slap was well deserved!"

Ron turned back to Hermione. "Don't think you can come crawling back to me after this, you bitch. I don't want to marry you now; I don't even want to see you ever again."

"At last, we're in agreement!" Hermione said.

Ron spun on his heel and strode down the corridor.

He stopped in front of his father and held out his hand.

Arthur shook his head, and then he spoke. "I never thought I'd see the day when I'd be ashamed of one of my children."

"You don't understand," Ron protested.

"You're right, I don't. I'm not sure I ever will. Now, go home, Ronald."

"I need my wand."

"Use the Floo in the Atrium. I'll return your wand to you later."

Ron glared but he didn't say anything more. He pushed past Arthur and headed toward the lifts that would take him to the Atrium and the Floo there.

Arthur shook his head as he watched his youngest son stalk away. Then he walked over to stand in front of Hermione.

"I had no idea that you ... that he ... that you had found him with ..." Arthur began.

"It doesn't matter now," Hermione said in a weary tone. "Looking back, it was probably the best thing that could have happened to me."

"How can you say that?"

"Because finding him like that gave me the impetus I needed to finally break it off with him for good. It took me a while to get over it completely, but I did, and that meant I wasn't carrying any baggage when I married Severus."

Arthur looked at her sharply. "You really love Severus, don't you?"

Hermione started to shake her head to deny it, but instead she decided it was time to admit the truth. "More than I ever thought I could love anyone," she replied.

"Then why are you here?" Arthur asked kindly. "The annulment isn't mandatory; you can stay married if you want to."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "Severus doesn't want to stay married."

"How can you say that? He cares about you deeply. The other night at St. Mungo's he was frantic with worry over you."

She shook her head again. "No. I was merely the least objectionable of the poor choices available to him. He's quite happily looking forward to ending our marriage."

"I think you're wrong, Hermione," Arthur said as he reached out and touched her cheek with a gentle hand.

"He doesn't care about me, and he doesn't trust me. If he did, he wouldn't have walked out when the Ministry owl arrived with the information about the hearing."

"He assumed you had requested the hearing?"

She nodded. "He assumed the worst of me! I thought we had moved past that, but I was wrong. He doesn't love me, and I love him too much to force him to stay with me if that isn't what he truly wants."

"I could talk to him; I could explain what Ron and Percy did."

"Don't you dare," Hermione warned.

"But ..."

"No."

Arthur sighed, but acquiesced. "All right," he said as he looked over Hermione's shoulder. "But, you'd better brace up, then, because here he comes."

Hermione took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She turned to face the man she loved, the man she'd married, the man who didn't want her.

Hermione and Snape stared at each other for a moment, and then Snape turned away without speaking.

The door to the courtroom opened, and the clerk of the court stepped out.

"Mrs. Snape?"

She turned her head. "Yes?"

"The Healer is ready for you."

"All right."

"Mr. Snape, do you wish to be present for the exam?" the clerk asked, raising his voice slightly.

Snape didn't even bother to turn around when he answered. "Why would I?"

"You can wait in the courtroom, then. This won't take long. Follow me, Mrs. Snape."

"Hermione," Arthur spoke softly.

"Let it be, Arthur. Please, just let it be."

Hermione followed the clerk into the courtroom. Arthur watched as the door closed behind her, and then he walked away without speaking to Snape.

Twenty minutes later, Hermione and the Healer left the small anteroom that had been used for the diagnostic spell and entered the courtroom proper. Hermione took the spot the clerk indicated on Snape's left, and the Healer stood next to her.

Tiberius Ogden, the Wizengamot official chosen by the Chief Warlock to oversee the hearing, peered through his spectacles at the couple before him, and then he shifted his gaze and addressed the Healer.

"Is the exam complete?"

"This witch is not carrying a child, and I hereby attest to that fact," the Healer said in a solemn tone. He stepped forward and handed a parchment to the clerk of the court.

"Thank you for your services," Ogden said in an equally solemn tone. "You may leave the courtroom."

The Healer bowed slightly, and then he turned and walked out.

Ogden waited until the door closed behind the departing Healer, and then he turned his gaze back to the witch and wizard standing before him.

"Severus Snape and Hermione Snape, née Granger, on behalf of the Minister for Magic, the Chief Warlock, every member of the Wizengamot, and myself personally, I wish to extend heartfelt apologies for the turmoil and upheaval that the Conjugal Required Accelerated Procreation Statute, otherwise known as the Marriage and Baby Law, has visited upon you. While our apologies cannot change the injustice done to you, it is our sincere hope that you will each be able to move forward and forget the pain and humiliation this unforgivable intrusion upon your lives has caused ..."

"Just get *on* with it, you pompous, old wind bag," Snape muttered under his breath, and Hermione smiled slightly in spite of her heartache.

Ogden, completely oblivious to Snape's impatient mumble, droned on for a few more moments before he finally got to the gist of the matter.

"This court will now consider the marriage of Severus Snape and Hermione Snape, née Granger. The parties named entered into this marriage under the duress of the Marriage and Baby Law, and a qualified Healer has determined that no child has been created between them. They are, therefore, entitled to end their union immediately and without legal prejudice.

"I see from your paperwork that your marriage, although not a wizarding ceremony, was magically witnessed by Martin Gladstone, a wizard who is also related to one of you. Is that correct?"

"Martin Gladstone is my fourth or fifth cousin; hardly a relative at all," Snape said in a dismissive tone.

"You wound me, Cousin," boomed a voice from the back of the dimly lit courtroom.

At the sound, both Hermione and Snape turned around. Tiberius Ogden lifted his head from the papers in front of him to glare at the source of the voice.

"What is the meaning of this interruption?" he demanded.

"My apologies, Tiberius," said Arthur Weasley as he stepped out of the shadows with Martin. "Mr. Gladstone is with me."

"And why are you here, Arthur? There are sensitive and delicate matters being discussed here."

"Severus and Hermione Snape are friends, both to Martin Gladstone and to me; we are here merely to observe and to offer our support."

"Do either of the parties have an objection to the presence of these observers?" Ogden asked.

Hermione shook her head.

"You must answer verbally, Mrs. Snape ... for the record, you understand."

"I've no objection," she said in a soft voice.

"And you, Mr. Snape?" Ogden asked.

Snape turned and sent a scornful look at Martin. "I suppose since you were present when this farce of a marriage began, *Cousin*, it's only fitting that you be here to see it end."

"You're a damn fool, Severus. I'm amazed that she's managed to put up with you for all of the six days you've been married!"

"Shut up, Martin," Snape growled.

"Gladly. I didn't come here for your benefit, anyway." And with those words, Martin walked over and stood beside Hermione.

"Hello, my dear," he said gently. "I heard there was some commotion here the other day and that you were injured. Are you all right?" He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

Hermione gave him a small, sad smile. "I'm fine, Martin, really."

"Of course you are," he said.

"Perhaps you'd like to ask her to dinner?" Ogden asked in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

"As a matter of fact ..."

"And perhaps I'll hold you in contempt!"

"I'll ask her later," Martin said, completely unabashed. "Do carry on."

With a final glare at the impudent wizard, Ogden cleared his throat and started speaking again.

"Where were we? Ah ... yes. It has been determined that your marriage had a magical witness, correct?"

"Yes," Snape conceded.

"Yes," Hermione said.

"And the marriage was consummated?"

Hermione flushed, and even Snape looked uncomfortable. "It was consummated," he finally said.

"Mrs. Snape, I appreciate that this is unpleasant for you, but again, you must answer verbally. Was the marriage consummated?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Because the marriage was magically witnessed and lawfully consummated, it is beyond the scope of this court to grant an annulment."

For one brief moment, Hermione felt the flare of hope in her heart, but Ogden's next words snuffed out even that tiny ember.

"This court does, however, have the authority to issue a Bill of Divorcement, as long as both parties consent."

"Severus Snape, is it your wish to divorce this woman?"

Snape stared straight ahead as he answered.

"It is."

"Hermione Snape, is it your wish to divorce this man?"

Hermione turned to look at her husband. He was still staring straight ahead, refusing to meet her eyes. She sighed and then looked up at Ogden.

"It is my wish to grant my husband his wish," she replied in a near whisper.

It took a moment for Hermione's words to register, but when they did, Snape turned to look at her for the first time since they'd entered the courtroom. She was pale, and her bottom lip was trembling slightly. Even as he watched her blink rapidly, a tear welled from the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek.

Ogden spoke again. "Having received the consent of both parties, it is the ruling of this court that the marriage between Severus Snape and Hermione Snape née Granger is hereby ended. The customary waiting period for the Bill of Divorcement is hereby waived. Mr. Snape, Miss Granger, with the apologies of this court, you are free to go."

He raised his gavel, and Snape called out, "Wait!"

But his protest came too late, and the gavel banged down.

Hermione had prepared herself for the emotional pain at least she thought she had. She hadn't expected the physical pain, however.

"No ..." she gasped as she felt the burning, tearing pain rip through her chest. "Oh, no ..."

Her knees buckled, and Martin, who was still holding her hand, slipped his arm around her waist to help ease her down to the floor.

Snape collapsed beside her, his face twisted into a grimace of agony. Somehow, he managed to reach out and grasp her hand.

"Hermione ... gods, Hermione ..."

"Hurts ..." she sobbed. "Hurts so much ..."

Snape tried to pull her closer, but the pain stole his strength.

Arthur, who'd been watching the proceedings from the rear of the courtroom, hurried over to the couple.

"Is it as you suspected, Martin?" Arthur asked as he leaned over the trio huddled on the floor.

"Yes ... this confirms it."

Arthur straightened and shouted up toward the bench.

"Tiberius, you must rescind the Bill of Divorcement! They're bound!"

"There's nothing in their records to indicate that they're bound," Ogden protested as he shuffled some papers around in front of him. "They should know they can't get a divorce!"

"It was a spontaneous binding. Even they weren't aware that it had occurred. These proceedings are interfering with their bond, and you must rescind the divorce immediately!"

"It's never been proven that spontaneous binding exists ..."

A low moan from Snape and a sob from Hermione had Arthur drawing his wand and approaching Tiberius Ogden with a murderous gleam in his eye.

"You can see for yourself that they're both in agony! We can argue magical theory later. Right now, as Minister for Magic, I demand you rescind the Bill of Divorcement!" Arthur pointed his wand at Ogden menacingly.

"Don't get your pants in a pinch, Arthur," Ogden grumbled.

As Arthur took another step forward, Ogden picked up his gavel.

"The Bill of Divorcement between Severus Snape and Hermione Snape née Granger is hereby rescinded. Mr. and Mrs. Snape remain married in the eyes of this court!"

And then he banged his gavel down sharply once again.

By the time Arthur turned away from the bench and moved back to where Martin, Snape, and Hermione had fallen, the crisis had passed.

Snape was already sitting up, and he had pulled Hermione into a sitting position beside him.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Snape asked. "Are you still in pain?"

Hermione was weak and trembling, but she forced herself to speak. "It's ... it's fading."

"Just sit for a few moments, both of you, until you get your strength back," Martin said as he got to his feet.

"What happened to us?" Hermione asked. She was still shaking, but the pain had receded even more.

"Something unprecedented at least in modern history," Arthur said.

"You'd better have a better explanation than that," Snape growled.

"Your cousin can probably explain it better than I can. He's the one who recognized the phenomenon."

Snape shifted his gaze from Arthur to Martin. "Well?"

"I believe that you two have experienced a spontaneous binding," Martin said.

"What the fuck is a spontaneous binding?" Snape demanded. He was feeling a lot stronger. He shifted to get his legs under him and rose gingerly to his feet. When his knees held him, he reached down and took Hermione's hand and helped her to stand as well. He then led her to one of the benches that lined the centre of the courtroom and urged her to sit. He sat beside her, but he didn't release her hand.

"I've ... I've read about them," Hermione said. "Magical theorists have debated their existence for decades."

"They exist," Martin said emphatically. "You two are living proof of that."

Arthur, who had seated himself on Hermione's other side, looked over to where Tiberius Ogden and the clerk were standing and staring at them with obvious interest.

"If you're both feeling strong enough, why don't we continue this discussion in my office? I'll order tea."

"We're not to be disturbed, Edwards," Arthur said ten minutes later as his aide set down the tea tray.

"Of course, Minister," Edwards said and bowed himself out of the office.

For a few moments, the four of them busied themselves with their teacups. Arthur reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a half-full bottle of Ogden's Old. He didn't ask for permission, he simply poured a generous slug into each of their cups.

"Now that we're sufficiently recovered, and fortified, I believe we're ready to hear what happened to us," Snape said. "Spill it, Martin."

Martin cleared his throat, took a sip of his tea, and then set his cup down. "A spontaneous binding is just what it sounds like - a binding that happens without being formally initiated. I suspected it when the blue sparks showered us after I witnessed your signatures on your Certificate of Marriage."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"Would you have believed me if I *had* said something?" Martin challenged. "You were adamant that yours was a 'marriage of convenience'. I wanted to give you time to adjust to being married. I knew I'd have to tell you, but I thought I'd have a bit of time."

"I didn't expect the whole bloody boil-on-the-backside-Marriage-and-Baby-Law to rupture as quickly and as spectacularly as it did! When I read the news about the Wizengamot scheduling hearings to grant annulments and divorces, I knew I had to tell you right away - which is why I came to London."

"And once again, events had moved faster than I anticipated. I contacted Filius Flitwick, who in turn put me in touch with Arthur here. I'd barely stepped through the Floo in the Atrium when your hearing was called to order."

"Why didn't you try to stop it?" Hermione asked.

"My question, as well," Snape said. "Or perhaps you enjoyed watching us suffer?"

"Severus!" Arthur scolded.

Martin glared at Snape. "I won't dignify that remark by denying it. I know you, Severus. I know how stubborn and intractable you are. Can you honestly sit there and tell me that you would have taken my word without proof?"

Snape opened his mouth, but no words came out. He knew his cousin was right. He wouldn't have believed that he and Hermione were bound. He closed his mouth with an audible snap of his teeth.

Martin turned to Hermione. "Oh, my dear, dear girl, I'm so sorry that you had to hurt so just to prove a point to my obstinate and pig-headed cousin."

Hermione smiled. "I probably wouldn't have believed you, either," she said.

"No, but you would have at least listened to what I had to say. This one ..." he jerked his chin towards Snape "... is a jackass!"

"Yes, sometimes he is," Hermione agreed.

"Thank you for that ringing endorsement, *wife*," Snape said mockingly.

"Oh, shut it, Severus," Martin said. "You know I'm right; you wouldn't have listened to a word I said."

"I'm listening now, so why don't you explain how this happened."

"As Hermione said, there's been debate for decades about spontaneous binding. Those who believe it exists have put forth the theory that it occurs when four conditions are met."

"Conditions?"

"Conditions, circumstances, events - it doesn't matter which word you use to describe the confluence of factors that lead to the spontaneous binding."

"Sounds like gibberish to me," Snape said in a mocking tone.

"Of course it does ... and you wonder why I didn't attempt to convince you!"

"Stop it!" Hermione had to raise her voice to be heard over their bickering. "Stop it, both of you! You, Martin, stop baiting him."

Snape smirked, and then Hermione rounded on him.

"And you, *husband*, you stop snarling at Martin. None of this is his fault, you know. He could have stayed on Cyprus, and when we collapsed in front of Tiberius Ogden, no one would have known what was happening to us or how to help us. We'd be dead, and you'd have your wish to see our marriage ended!"

Once again, Snape was rendered speechless as the truth of her words penetrated his anger-fogged brain.

Hermione turned back to Martin and spoke again. "Now, maybe Severus doesn't care how we came to be bonded, but *do*. Please continue."

"Of course, my dear."

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, there are four conditions that must be met before a spontaneous binding occurs."

"The first condition is that the two parties involved must come together voluntarily."

It seemed that Snape was constitutionally unable to resist inserting a sarcastic remark. "We came together voluntarily? Without the C.R.A.P. Statute hanging over our heads we'd never have agreed to marry!"

"You had options, Severus. You had choices," Arthur interjected. "They were undesirable options and unappealing choices to be sure, but options and choices none the less. Yet, you and Hermione agreed of your own volition to marry, isn't that so?"

"Well ... yes," Snape said, "but ..."

"There is no 'but'," Martin maintained. "You came together voluntarily."

"What's the second condition?" Hermione asked before Snape could offer any further argument.

"The second condition is that the binding be witnessed by a person of magic who is also a blood relative of one of the parties. As you have already stipulated, that's exactly what happened."

"It was a civil ceremony not a magical binding ceremony," Snape insisted.

"In theory, any ceremony is a binding ceremony if the other conditions are met."

"How convenient," Snape said. "And the third condition?"

"The third condition is that both parties must have the intent to enter into an irrevocable, lifetime commitment."

"We never intended any such thing!" Severus said almost triumphantly. "The marriage was a scam. It was a well laid out scheme designed to circumvent the provisions of a law we felt was unjust."

"You know what they say about the best laid schemes," Arthur said calmly as he sipped his tea.

"How profound, Arthur," Snape said with a scowl.

"Is that how you felt about the marriage, Hermione," Martin asked shrewdly. "Did you feel it was a scam, a scheme, and never meant to last?"

"We were talking about getting a divorce before we were even married," Snape interrupted yet again. "We were, weren't we, Hermione?" he asked her in an almost desperate tone.

"Yes, we were," she agreed. "But ...but I also remember thinking how much I wished that the marriage could be forever."

"Somewhere deep in the recesses of your heart and your mind, you formed the same intent, Severus," Martin said in the kindest tone he'd used with Snape all day.

Snape got to his feet and went to stand in front of Hermione.

"Why, Hermione? Why would you wish such a thing?"

She looked up and stared into his dark, unreadable eyes. "Because I love you," she said simply. "Why would you?"

Snape seemed completely taken aback by her statement.

"Because you love her, as well, don't you, Severus?" Arthur prodded gently.

"You know you love her," Martin stated. "Why don't you just admit it?"

Snape wanted to deny it, but he couldn't get his lips and tongue to form the words.

He looked at Hermione, and then his gaze slid to Arthur and Martin, and then back to Hermione again.

"That's the fourth condition, isn't it?" He asked the question of Martin, but his eyes never left Hermione's face, and his voice held a longing tone that he was sure had never come from his mouth before.

"Yes," Martin said softly. "That's the final condition and the most important one."

"You ... you love me?" Hermione asked in a voice filled with wonder.

Snape cupped her cheek and brushed his thumb across its velvety surface. "With all my heart."

And then pulled her to her feet and kissed her.

Their kiss was long, deep, and satisfying, and when they finally broke apart, they both seemed a little startled to discover that they weren't alone.

Martin was looking on, smiling like a proud father. "It's about time! I swear, Sev, you are the most stubborn, intransigent, obdurate, unyielding, inflexible man I've ever known."

"Are you done insulting me?" Snape asked mildly.

"Nearly; did I mention that you're also insufferably smug?"

Snape quirked an amused brow, and then extended his hand to his cousin.

"Thank you, Martin ... for everything. And if you ever call me 'Sev' again, I'll roast your balls for breakfast."

Martin laughed and took Snape's hand. "Be happy, Cousin Severus. And take care of this jewel." He released Snape's hand and pulled Hermione into his arms for a hug.

"Thank you, Martin," she murmured into his chest.

"And you take care of him," Martin said thickly.

"I will, I promise."

Arthur was also smiling as he watched and listened. "I really think you two should go home now," he said. "I'm sure you have a lot to talk about."

And so they went home and they talked. They talked about love, about trust, and about honest communication.

Hermione told Severus about her encounter with Ron at the Ministry, and his and Percy's scheme to end their marriage.

"The hearing was Weasley's doing?"

"He thought he was doing me a favour."

"I'll do him a favour," Snape said in a dangerous tone. "This whole incident was his fault!"

Hermione shook her head. "No, it was *our* fault."

"How can you say that?"

"Ron set up the hearing, but we both showed up, didn't we?"

"When I read the notice from the Ministry, I thought you wanted out of our marriage," Snape said.

"Had I given you any indication that I wanted out?"

"I knew I hadn't requested a hearing," Snape insisted stubbornly. "The logical assumption was that *you* had."

"But I *hadn't*. And instead of asking me about it, you jumped to conclusions and stomped off."

"I don't stomp!"

"It doesn't matter whether you stomped, swooped, or Apparated away," Hermione said sternly. "The point is, you *left*. You didn't trust me enough to talk to me."

Snape looked into the earnest, open face of his wife, the woman he had come to love. And he knew that if he didn't open himself as fully as she had, he would lose her. And losing her was not something he was prepared to do. Not now ... not ever.

"It wasn't you I didn't trust," he said. "I didn't trust myself."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't trust myself not to beg you to stay married to me."

Hermione's stern façade crumbled.

"Oh, Severus."

"In my own defence, when I heard your response to Ogden's question, I tried to stop the proceedings."

"I remember hearing that."

Snape swallowed hard, and then he continued. "I'm sorry my ... my stubborn pride caused you pain."

"You were in pain, as well," Hermione said.

"Yes, but I deserved to be; you didn't."

"I'm as much at fault as you are. I should have let Arthur talk to you when he wanted to after Ron left. It was *my* stubborn pride that got in the way then."

"So we're both prideful and stubborn," he said. "But we're both extremely intelligent, as well. I'd be willing to wager that we can learn from our mistakes."

"I'll take that bet," Hermione said.

And then she smiled, and Snape wrapped her in his arms and kissed her again.

Much later, they were eating curry take-away and reflecting on the turn their lives had taken.

"I'm still not sure I understand just how the magic of a spontaneous binding works," Snape said. "It seems impossible."

Hermione smiled. "To most people in the world, all magic seems impossible. Yet, we're living proof that magic exists."

"True enough."

"Magic exists, and our binding exists; it can't be undone." She picked up her fork and bent her head over her plate.

"If you could, would you undo it?" he asked in a quiet tone that had Hermione raising her head sharply.

She met his eyes and spoke firmly. "I wouldn't change anything. Do you hear me, Severus? I wouldn't change *anything*. Would you?"

He looked into the intense, gold-flecked eyes of his wife. He reached across the table and stroked her cheek softly. "No, Hermione. I wouldn't change anything."

She covered his hand with hers, and then she turned her head and kissed the inside of his palm.

"Good. Now eat your curry before it goes cold."

"Yes, dear," he said with an exaggerated sigh. Then he picked up his fork and tucked in.

Epilogue

And so ends our tale of well laid schemes.

Some schemes ended sadly.

Sybill Trelawney lived out her days in the Janus Thickey ward at St. Mungo's. She had few visitors, but on the rare occasion when a charitably-minded individual saw fit to stop by her bed, she was always happy to brag about her fiancé, the decorated war hero, Severus Snape, and to share her wedding plans with her guest.

Some schemes ended happily.

Amazingly, more than ninety-eight percent of the couples whose marriages were arranged under the C.R.A.P. Statute chose to remain married, or they re-married after their annulment or divorce. For all her insanity, it seemed that Sybill Trelawney had, in fact, possessed a unique talent for match-making.

Some schemes ended with a twist of irony.

Although the C.R.A.P. Statute had been enacted for all the wrong reasons, the resultant increase in the number of babies born, and the relatively low incidence of Squib-births, meant that Arthur Weasley suffered few consequences for his part in its passage. In fact, the Wizengamot, in a move that negated its own culpability as well as Arthur's, refused to accept his resignation, and he continued to serve as Minister for Magic for many, many years.

Percy Weasley was officially reprimanded for discussing Ministry business with an outsider and for arranging a hearing without the permission of the parties involved. Thirteen years after being demoted to the rank of assistant file clerk, the blot on his record was expunged, and he was promoted to chief file clerk, a post he held until his retirement.

Ron Weasley married twice more, the last time to a shy, retiring Muggle-born witch from a well-heeled family in Northumberland. When she found him dallying with the upstairs maid, she cast an impotency charm of her own invention on him. She released it twice a year on Boxing Day and on her birthday. He never cheated on her again.

And one scheme, the best laid scheme of them all, never really ended.

Severus and Hermione, both admittedly stubborn and prideful, had an occasionally turbulent, always passionate, but ultimately deeply satisfying marriage. They were inseparable in life, and nearly a century after they'd married, they died within hours of each other. Their three children, seven grandchildren, and seventeen great-grandchildren mourned them, but happily carried on a unique relationship with them when they moved into the same portrait to continue their love story through eternity.

Thus proving that the best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.

(But not always!)

Author's note: The often misquoted line from which the title of this story is taken is from the poem "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns. The actual quote is:

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men

gang aft a-gley.

This story was written for the Potter Place's Variety Challenge. This is the prompt I chose: Something Old Revisit a once popular challenge. I chose to revisit the Marriage Law Challenge, but I've placed the story in a post-DH timeline.