

The Marriage Benefit

by mia madwyn

It's all about the money.

[Euphoria Elixir: BEST HUMOUR & Strengthening Solution; BEST MID-LENGTH awards in the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards]

~one~

Chapter 1 of 2

It's all about the money.

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THE MARRIAGE BENEFIT

(or)

How Granger And Snape Buggered The Ministry, The Board Of Governors,

Minerva And The Entire Hogwarts Staff

Whilst Finding True Love

Hermione clapped politely, her mind racing.

Wasn't anybody going to say anything?

The expressions on the faces of the other members of the staff were benign, pleased and generous.

Annoying her all the more.

The lot of them were selfish buggers who cared nothing about what was just and fair, since they already had their years of service, pensions and security. Why should they care?

Whilst she sat there barely making ends meet on her first year's pittance watching Neville...dear, sweet Neville...double his salary in one fell swoop.

Simply by getting married.

"We're hoping that this new policy will encourage more young people to seriously consider teaching careers at Hogwarts," Minerva announced crisply and with obvious

satisfaction.

Neville, to his credit, blushed furiously.

Minerva rose to her feet at the head of the staff table. "We will adjourn for lunch, and then return in one hour. We have much to accomplish before the students return on Friday..."

Hermione shot up and stood in her place, her heart pounding.

"Hermione?" Minerva smiled benevolently.

Hermione heard Snape snort his displeasure behind her, but refused to be deterred. "First, I'd like to congratulate Neville and Hannah," she said, relieved that her voice sounded calm and didn't betray her frustration. "And might I say that if anyone deserves a boon such as this, it's Neville."

His blush only deepened.

Snape muttered an oath behind her.

"But," Hermione said firmly, "the fact is that...and I must make it clear, this is not about the money...the very idea that a married staff member would get paid more than a single staff member is...it's insulting. It's not fair and it doesn't even make sense. If the Ministry feels the need to bribe us to marry this year, who is to say they won't *require* us to marry next year?"

"Professor Granger," Minerva said, briskly pulling rank, "I will not stand for this discussion at this time. If you wish to take issue with the new pay structure, I suggest you present your concerns to the Board of Governors and the Ministry. Do not disturb what should be a happy occasion for one of our colleagues with your petty..."

"It's not petty! And this isn't about Neville, or..."

Filius reached for her hand and patted it reassuringly. "Don't you see, my dear? This will make it easier for you to marry, as well. Now that the financial burden on young teachers is being eased..."

"Not young teachers," Hermione interrupted. "*Married* teachers. It's utterly presumptuous of you to imply that it's inevitable that I shall marry, or that I should ever *need* to marry in order to receive compensation commensurate to my abilities. The only reason you're not protesting is you've already taught enough years that you don't need the Marriage Benefit to have a respectable salary..."

"For someone who says it's not about the money," Snape sneered, "you're certainly making it about the money."

"It's not about the money!" Hermione seethed. "It's about the principle of the thing! It's about what's right! And what's fair! And..."

"It's about the fucking money," Snape snapped, rising to his feet behind her, "and the sooner you admit it, the sooner we can eat our lunch."

Hermione ground her teeth and glared at the ceiling. "All right," she said. "It's about the principle, and what's right, and what's fair...and it's about the fucking money!"

"And the Board of Governors is meeting again in December. You can present your concerns to them then. Meeting adjourned!" Minerva whisked toward the door without a backward glance, followed by almost everyone else in the room.

But not quite everyone.

"Brava, Granger, brava. You've found a new windmill at which to tilt, a new Ministry directive to protest, a new project at which to aim your self-righteous rage," Snape drawled, and she finally spun to face the thorn in her side.

"Snape," she said, "why aren't you enraged? Aren't you bothered in the least that in order to get that handy little bonus, you'd have to marry?"

"Sorry you let Weasley slip through your fingers last year?"

"Shoved him through the bloody door is more like it, as you well know."

Snape stared down his considerable nose at her. "It appears you have three options. You can fight this, and give yourself up to years of effort, which will most likely be for naught. You can continue teaching at a salary that is insulting to anyone, and certainly to a witch who had your opportunities and yet threw them away to teach. Or..."

"Or...?" Hermione watched him thinking, and yes, she could literally see the wheels turning behind those dark eyes with their decidedly unsettling gleam. "Or what?"

His smirk was even more unsettling. "You could marry."

She snorted and gathered up her notes from the morning's staff meeting. "Yes, because the Scottish Highlands are simply crawling with eligible wizards who want to marry a war heroine with more decorations than they have, more intelligence than they have, and live in this draughty old castle..." Her hand froze over the last scroll.

Her eyes met his. "Just so I can earn an extra 789 Galleons a year."

"It's about the fucking money," he repeated.

"All about the money," she agreed.

And marvelled that in that instant, it was decided, and nothing else truly need be said.

~*SS*HG*~

At precisely four minutes after the lunch hour (timed for the maximum dramatic impact, allowing for everyone else to be seated and staring at the door, waiting) the two of them returned to the staffroom, positively bubbling with suppressed glee.

To Hermione's surprise, Snape stepped ahead of her as they arrived at the door and reached over her head to hold it open...something only the most insipidly lovelorn wizard would ever do, considering how automatic it was to simply open the door magically. Splendid touch, that. "Thank you, darling," she cooed and fluttered her lashes up at him as she brushed past him and into the staffroom.

"Any time, my treasure," he said, his voice so silky she didn't know whether to laugh or scoff.

The stunned expressions on the rest of the room's occupants tipped her a little too close to laughter, so she quickly grabbed his arm and buried her face in his chest while she fought for composure.

"My most revered colleagues," Snape announced over her head, "my dear Hermione and I wanted you to be the first to know..."

"We're getting married," she said, and flashed a (hopefully) angelic smile. "I'm the happiest witch in the world!"

Neville goggled up at her. "You? And Snape?"

Hooch spewed tea across the table. "Bugger that!"

Flitwick sputtered, evidently unable to say a word.

"If you think I'm going to allow this travesty..." Minerva began.

Hermione mustered her best quivering lower lip and summoned tears. "...I thought you'd be happy for us!"

Snape shoved a handkerchief in her hand and pulled her closer. "I think," he said, his tone pure ice, "you will have to finish the day without us. I refuse to allow you to upset my fiancée in such a manner."

And as quickly as that, not only had they bested the Ministry, the Board of Governors and Minerva McGonagall...they had also skived off from the afternoon staff meeting.

Hermione's triumph had no bounds.

Just before he escorted her from the room, she spun around and gasped, "And we'll be registered at John Lewis, both the Muggle and wizarding stores, as soon as I choose between Spode and Royal Doulton!"

"Bloody hell, you don't...you don't expect *gifts*?" Minerva's shrill voice demanded.

"If you'll excuse me, I have a wedding to plan."

The door closed before they were subjected to any further felicitations on their joyous news.

~*SS*HG*~

"No wedding."

"I'm wearing white."

"Nimue's honey pot, Granger! You're not a..."

"Of course not, but I'm wearing white. We're having a wedding, with gifts, and music and dancing, and enough wine to launch a battleship."

"Who's paying?"

"The person who saw to it that I can't wear white," she said primly.

~*SS*HG*~

"Potter?" Snape exploded. "Potter paid for *my* wedding?"

"Oh, so now that we're the glamour couple of the post-war era, it's *your* wedding?" Hermione scoffed, twirling one white stiletto-heeled pump on the toes of her right foot. Then, staring at her outstretched leg, she scowled. "Do these white stockings make my legs look fat?"

Snape shot her an appraising look. "Not particularly." He took another swig from the wine bottle; they'd each given up glasses and gone straight to the source once they'd abandoned the reception.

"Good," she said, letting her foot drop to the plush hotel suite carpet. "I'd hate to think I looked fat on the most wonderful day of my life."

"You're pissed."

She allowed a peal of giggles to erupt. "Gods, I hope so! And you!" She studied him from across the room, squinting to bring him into sharper focus. "You get quite blurry when you're drunk." She paused, startled. "And your feet get quite loooong. In fact," she said, dropping her bottle to a precarious perch on the chair beside her and leaning forward. "In fact, I do believe you have the longest toes I've ever seen!"

"It's the nose, Granger, the size of the nose. That's what you're supposed to be looking at if you're wanting a preview of my todger." At which point, he exploded with drunken laughter.

She sent a fat pillow flying across the room to smack him right across said nose, and then burst into a fit of laughter and fell sideways, her wand held limp in her fingertips.

And then she remembered. She jerked upright. "Snape, my mother is beside herself. It's not enough that you went online and changed almost everything I'd registered for, but...thirty-seven place settings? What on earth possessed you to ask for thirty-seven place settings? And we got them all!"

"Did we?" That idea seemed to please him inordinately.

"What are we going to do with thirty-seven place settings of Wedgwood Chinoiserie Green, for the gods' sakes? When I specifically chose a very tasteful Spode! And you didn't change the colour of the table linen, so now every time we entertain..."

"There'll be no entertaining."

"...it will be fucking Christmas with the Snapes! Red table linens, green china with birds..." She broke off. "No entertaining? Then why the hell..."

"No birds. I spelled the pheasants into snakes. Wait until your mother sees *that*."

"Snakes?" Hermione asked. "On my dishes? Bloody hell!"

"Just the serving pieces. And they *writhe*."

She sighed. "But why thirty-seven?"

He touched the side of his nose. "It's a nice round number."

She longed to berate him, but deep down she only felt a simple desire to gloat. She smirked, caught herself at it, wondered if she'd been associating with Snape a little too much recently...and then smirked again. It wasn't as if that was going to change, after all. "Darling," she said sweetly, "my *darling* husband..."

He cut her a sharp look.

"We did it, didn't we?" She raised her bottle in a sloppy mock-toast. "We buggered the Ministry. We buggered the Board of Governors. We buggered Minerva..."

"Bloody hell," he winced, "Please, the image."

"And we bugged the bloody, bugging staff!"

"And Potter paid for it."

"Because he owes me."

"For what?"

"For...for everything. For saving his bugging arse more times than we could count, and for sharing homework more often than I care to remember, and for keeping his secrets, especially..." She broke off, feeling the burn of her cheeks.

"That the two of you had sex?" Snape asked, eyes gleaming.

"Well, not like that, it wasn't like, you know, make the beast of two backs, shout Hallelujah, then, 'oh and by the way, 'Mione, don't tell anyone and I'll pay for your wedding.'"

"Did you? Shout Hallelujah?"

"A lady doesn't tell."

"Clearly you didn't." He smirked.

"We were alone in a tent. It happened. We pretended it didn't." And now, it was her turn to let her eyes gleam. "And your first?"

"A whore in Knockturn Alley," he said with a satisfied sigh and closed his eyes.

"As romantic as it sounds?"

"Violins."

She found herself staring at his nose.

And remembering what he said about his todger.

She took a slug of wine. "You know, Snape, we're in a hotel suite, and it's our wedding night."

One dark eye opened. "Yes?"

"Well, I know we agreed not to, erm..."

"Have a bit of the two-backed beast?"

She nodded.

"Granger," he said, "who are the two most intelligent members of the Hogwarts staff?"

She snorted.

"And we decided, when we were both sober, that sex would be a bad thing."

"Very bad," she agreed.

"And yet, somehow, you think that now that we are both inebriated, our judgement is more sound?"

She blinked.

"As they say," he said silkily, "*in vino veritas*."

She blinked twice. Then beamed. "And Latin can't be wrong!"

"Indeed." At which point, he rose, a trifle unsteadily, to his feet.

As he crossed the floor to offer his hand, she stood (well, lurched) and...

Damn, that was a big nose when a person was this close to it...

And suddenly, she found herself being jerked to her feet and...fucking hell...he hoisted her aloft and was carrying her to the bedroom door.

"Watch it..." she cried, just before he stepped on her bouquet with his bare foot.

Suddenly, she was falling, landing hard on the floor...hard, and scrambling for her flowers, her beautiful flowers...

Snape hopped wildly on one foot, clinging to the other that was, unfortunately, dripping blood. "The bedroom is in there," he snarled. "After you *Darling*."

Clutching her crushed flowers to her chest, she restrained herself from bemoaning their ruin and simply walked as primly as possible through the door, as if one of her three-inch heels wasn't behind her somewhere, and the other still on her aching left foot.

And arriving, felt an incredible burst of frustration. "Bugger!"

"What now?" he asked.

"I didn't think we were going to have a real wedding night, so I didn't plan any appropriate lingerie!" It was almost enough to make a girl cry.

"Surely you don't think a husband...especially this husband...was fantasising about you in lingerie?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't care what fantasies you might have had. This was my fantasy. White lace and silk." She angled her body to allow him easier access to the zip down her back. She gasped as cool air hit her bare skin. "Maybe some mules with marabou feathers." Suddenly the gown with all its trappings was pooling around her ankles, and her foundation garments were all that remained to be stripped from her body. She felt so exposed. "Well," she said, steeling herself. "Let me do the same for you," and spun to face him.

The room went black.

"What the hell?"

"I prefer the dark." This time it was Snape who sounded prim.

She stood almost naked in the dark and wondered what it was about her that made him want to hide the view.

This wasn't going well. This wasn't going well at all.

"I think," she started, "I think maybe this is a mista..."

And then his lips hit her cheekbone and somehow slid their way to her mouth, and she couldn't speak at all. For thin lips, they were rather supple, she was surprised to note. In fact, she thought, opening her mouth, he wasn't a bad kisser at all; if anything, he stopped it too soon. When he pulled back, she leaned forward to follow the source of such nice kisses...

"Bugger!"

"Oh!" she cried. "I'm sorry! Was that your nose?"

She found herself being marched backward across a floor she dearly hoped was clear of obstacles. She struck the edge of the bed and fell onto her back. This was not exactly done with finesse, but, after all, it was Snape. She hadn't expected him to be particularly practised.

She reached up and found his shoulders bare. Ah, he must have spelled his clothes off. She tugged him lightly, hoping to bring him closer...

Only to have him lose his balance and fall flat across her.

"Will you let me lead, damn it?" he demanded. "You were bad enough on the dance floor, but I insist that in this situation you at least let me have some modicum of control, or I warn you, we are headed for disaster!"

"Whatever do you mean?" she snapped. "I did not lead on the dance floor and all I am doing now is encouraging you and as for disaster, I think we're already well on the road..."

And then she stopped.

Short.

Because her hand first brushed, then flinched away from, then reflexively returned to grab what had to be the largest cock to which she'd ever been introduced.

Although if it had a name, she really didn't want to know it.

He had the nerve to groan, just because she was grabbing him and examining his girth and his length, and he groaned again and she released him, demanding, "Just how experienced are you, Snape? Because if you lose control with this thing, I could be injured!"

"Experienced enough to know when I should be in charge, and when you should!" he snarled.

"You have to admit that thing is daunting..."

"Granger, if you don't stop talking, we're never going to maintain the proper mood."

"Well," she said huffily. "If we don't have the proper mood, whose fault is that?"

"What exactly are you implying?" His voice was neither silky nor seductive, and in fact, was quite gravelly with threat.

"Well," she repeated, her voice a little shrill even to her own ears, "you are the husband, and thus, I think it proper that you seduce me."

"Bugging, fucking hell..." he muttered.

"All right. I surrender to your experience," she said quickly, thinking that perhaps seduction had been a little much to expect. Intrigued and terrified, and maybe more than a little bit turned on, she lay still, waiting.

"I didn't say to be a corpse!"

"You're insufferable!"

"Just...just, all right," he sighed. "Give me a moment."

For too long, she lay beneath him, and he was far larger and heavier than he seemed when one was simply noticing his height and lean musculature...which was pleasant to notice, she had to admit. In fact, it made her want to... touch. So she stroked her fingers gently down his sides and bit back a gasp. His abdomen was hard and ridged with muscle, something she'd never expected. What did this man have, zero body fat? Slowly, she mapped her way up the contours of his pectorals, his shoulders, and realised that Severus Snape had been hiding quite a bit of man totty under his bat-like teaching robes.

And then his lips closed over her clavicle and she felt the softest tremors as he gently suckled, and she thought, maybe he actually had done this before... and she relaxed, just a little.

And then she felt it as it happened...his elbow slipped and he landed jaw first on her right breast. "Ow!" she howled, reaching to shove his face away.

And jabbed him in the ear.

"Fuck!"

At least, she hoped it was his ear.

And not his nostril.

And then felt the rush of cold air as he jerked away and left her lying there, quite naked, and sprawled across the bed.

"We're going to try this a different way," he grumbled, rolling to his back and pulling her over him. And then those long fingers were travelling their way up her thighs and she caught her breath. Oh, my yes. That was nice. And they didn't even hesitate, but tracked their inerrant path to the soft recesses of her body that, despite everything, seemed quite eager for invasion. "Oooh," she sighed, as he proved himself quite dexterous, indeed, although the sudden memory of those fingers expertly manipulating bubotubers almost ruined the moment.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

And whilst it was hard for her to think of what was ahead and say without question she was ready, she also thought, four bottles of wine between them taken into

consideration, she was ready enough. "Yes," she breathed.

At which point he hoisted her over him until she could brace herself with her hands on his shoulders and his hands steadied her waist, and she found herself poised for the plunge, so to speak, with the largest male protuberance she'd ever experienced between her legs.

"Easy," he murmured, his voice tense. "Go slowly, you can do it..."

She lowered herself an inch, felt him shudder beneath her, and felt herself stretching, but not too uncomfortably. She took a slow breath, and lowered herself a bit further. Fucking hell, she should have been warned. She should have done some stretching exercises. She should have...should have...

It came upon her so quickly, she had not time to prepare for it.

She sneezed.

She shrieked, as she found herself impaled.

"Merlin's fucking ghost." He groaned, and began moving beneath her.

And it was all she could do to breathe deeply and simply ride through it, sighing forlornly into his ear, "Harder, harder, oh that's it, harder, harder..." to at least give him a decent experience since any arousal she might have felt was long gone, right with his control.

And then he was finished, and she was relieved, and oh, this was one of the worst ideas she had ever had and her quivering legs were so ready to collapse, and why hadn't she noticed that more quickly because...

"Oomph!"

"I'm sorry!" she gasped. "I fell."

"What the bugging hell was..."

"My elbow. Was that your...eye? This is ridiculous. I'm turning on the lamp. Why on earth you wanted the lights out...where's the ruddy lamp?" She rolled away from him and reached for the bedside table, only to have him follow her.

She felt his hand close around her wrist.

"I said *don't!*"

"Forget it," she snapped, sitting up, just as he decided to lean over her. Their foreheads knocked and she fell flat, with his dead weight across her. "Snape," she said. "Get up. I can't breathe."

He didn't answer. Nor did he move.

"Snape?" she said sharply. "Oh, hell, what now?" Her head was beginning to throb the way it did when she'd had too much red wine. Which, of course, she had. Once they finished off the champagne. She somehow managed to get both hands under him and give a mighty heave.

He landed, from the sound of it, on the floor.

"Bloody hell!"

She hung her head over the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry...."

"I'm sleeping on the sofa."

"No!" she cried. "Not on our wedding night! What will the maids say?"

"Who cares what the maids say? I'm going to the..." She cringed at the sound of flesh bumping into something unmoving. "Fucking hell!"

She finally found the lamp switch and the room exploded with light. "You're bleeding!"

"Your head, my nose, yes, I'm bleeding."

"You poor man," she cooed, leading him back to the bed. "Let me get you a cold compress."

It was a frightening indication of just how injured...or drunk...or both...he was that he didn't even whimper a complaint.

Nor did he seem aware that as she washed the blood off of his face, she was also seeing the scars across his bare chest. So, this was why he wanted it dark. He didn't want her to see his scars.

She sighed, sadly.

She supposed if he thought these were bad, she was very lucky he hadn't seen the scar Dolohov's curse had left across her left breast....

She placed his hand on the compress, effectively keeping both his eyes closed as she drew away. "Hold this while I get my wand."

But before she retrieved her wand, she found her warm, high-necked nightgown...thankfully packed with the thought that they wouldn't be sharing a bed...and pulled it over her head. Only when she was decently covered and buttoned to the neck did she finally head for the wand that would stop the nosebleed.

~*SS*HG*~

Morning...or perhaps midday...dawned and Hermione found herself with a throbbing head, an aching groin and a basketful of regrets.

What had she been thinking?

And what if he wanted more?

She heard a pathetic whimper and realised it was her own.

"Here, drink this."

His voice was gruff but the scent of hangover potion was unmistakable and she raised herself painfully to drink every drop, her hand closing over his as he held it steady. "Thank you," she sighed.

"And when you're feeling up to it..." His voice drifted, and then he cleared his throat. "I'm not feeling quite my best either, and would prefer not to be aiming my own wand at

my injuries."

She squinted up at him and saw, with horror, a black eye, a broken nose and a swollen chin. "Did I do all that?"

"I think it best not to place blame, as long as we don't repeat this disastrous performance," he intoned flatly.

"Indeed," she sighed.

He was fully clothed and she was still fully covered in her nightgown, and all seemed almost right with the world.

"And then, our public awaits," he smirked.

Her world brightened. "Our public?"

"Yes, I do think a few photo ops are in order before we return to Hogwarts, don't you?"

Anticipating the expressions on the staffs' faces when they all gathered for breakfast and *The Daily Prophet* the next morning, she grinned.

~*TBC*~

A/N: Written for a prompt from windypoint for the 2008 SS/HG Gift Exchange. Chocolate and kudos to the betas who helped me get it written: annietalbot, ginny_weasley31, deemichelle, and lifeasanamazon .

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Chapter 2 of 2

It's all about the money.

[Euphoria Elixir: BEST HUMOUR & Strengthening Solution; BEST MID-LENGTH awards in the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards]

Two years later

They entered the staffroom as they always did, Severus holding open the door with an, "After you, darling," and Hermione cooing a, "Thank you, dearest," as she passed him.

He pulled out her chair and she took her seat demurely and began pouring his tea.

Whilst everyone else around the table glowered at them.

The buggers.

"If we are all present," Minerva said pointedly, though Hermione and Severus had taken their seats precisely at the top of the hour so no one could accuse them of holding up the proceedings, "I am happy to announce that Neville and Hannah now have a bouncing baby boy."

As this news had spread quickly the night before, it was greeted warmly and without undue surprise or hubbub.

Hermione made it a point to clap with extra enthusiasm, as she and Severus had never quite been forgiven for stealing Neville's thunder when their wedding attracted ten times the media attention as his. Though why anyone should care, she had no idea.

"Thus," Minerva continued crisply, "Neville's paternity leave commences immediately and lasts for fifty-six days..."

"Is that paid leave?" Severus asked, his tone benign.

"Paid at 90%," Minerva responded sternly, "as per the law. Now, if I might continue..."

"Minerva," Hermione asked sweetly, "is there by any chance a Baby Benefit for married teachers?"

"Merlin's saggy testicles!" Hooch barked. "If the two of you think you can get away with faking a baby..."

Hermione allowed her lips to quiver, and Severus closed his hand over hers on top of the table. "There, there, my treasure, they're just jealous."

She beamed up at him. "Perhaps we should have one?"

He cocked a questioning brow at Minerva. "This benefit, is it a flat rate, or per child?"

"Severus Snape, don't you dare..."

"How about four?" he asked Hermione, raising her fingers to his lips.

Septima leapt to her feet. "I refuse to witness this outrage."

"Septima, sit down!" Minerva pointed a bony finger at Severus. "And no more from you! There is no benefit for children!"

"As I've always said." Severus nodded smugly. "The little buggers."

Hermione's eyes met Severus's for the merest heartbeat; any longer would have brought forth the laughter best saved for later.

"Hermione," Severus drawled in his most silken tones. "If two people are in love yet no one believes it, is it still love?"

She fluttered her eyelashes and smirked.

Then turned her attention back to Minerva, who by this point was almost apoplectic. "You were saying, Minerva?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes. Yes." Minerva cleared her throat and smoothed her bodice. "As I was saying, we are greatly honoured to have a renowned herbologist fill in for dear Neville during his leave. In fact, I had thought she would be here by now; I hope the wards haven't given her difficulty. Professor Isabella Soul has studied in Berlin, California, Tasmania and the Yangtze valley, and..."

As Minerva droned on about the many and impressive qualifications of Professor Soul, Hermione stifled a tiny quiver of regret. Such studies, such travels, such honours. She'd dreamed of a similar career and yet, when the war ended, she'd simply been so weary, and she truly did love teaching.... She sighed.

"Isabella!" Minerva warbled, as the staffroom door opened.

Hermione glanced up and froze.

Standing framed in the door was the most stunning woman she'd ever seen, with tousled bright auburn curls and eyes as green...no, even greener than Harry's.

Severus withdrew his hand from hers and rose to his feet, as did every other man at the table.

Isabella Soul sailed in with flustered laughter and seemed to bring the sun into the room with her. "I'm so sorry that I'm late," she said, her voice light and charming.

"No problem at all," Minerva answered. "There's an empty chair by Severus."

And Hermione could only stare with a strange heaviness in her breast at the woman who looked so much like Lily Potter.

~*SS*HG*~

Hermione sat at her desk, working her way through a stack of Defence Against the Dark Arts essays. So few years had passed since the defeat of Voldemort, yet the students seemed to have lost any passion for the subject, making their desultory work even more of a labour to mark.

Severus placed a cup of her favourite jasmine tea before her.

"Thank you," she sighed gratefully.

"No problem, treasure," he said absent-mindedly as he studied a parchment covered with his own cramped script. Habit, it might be, but it did please her to hear the word *treasure* from that dark velvet voice.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he said. "Nothing. I'm just going over the supplies I'll need from the greenhouses in the next few weeks. This seems the perfect time to improve the quality of the mandrakes."

"That again?" she asked, ignoring the clutch in her chest. "The way you go on about the mandrakes, you'd think nobody but Pomona knew how to grow them properly."

"Longbottom is too easy on them, and it shows in their diminished potency," he said. "I'm hoping Professor Soul will be here long enough to straighten them out."

"Oh, I do hope so, too," Hermione said sweetly, replacing her teacup in its saucer with perhaps a bit too much force. "I'm ready for a nightcap. Firewhisky, darling?" And if *darling* had a bit of an edge, who could blame her?

"Hmm?" He glanced at her untouched tea and met her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

She poured three fingers into the Baccarat tumbler, part of the set that her parents had given them for their second anniversary. "Whatever would make you think something is wrong?"

"You never drink firewhisky." He studied her as if she were an obstreperous potion.

"Perhaps I never had reason," she countered edgily. And then, raising the glass, continued, "How else would I ever get to use our good crystal? Cheers."

And feeling rather peevisish, she carried it off to her bedroom, leaving him to study his list without interruption.

~*SS*HG*~

By the cold light of day, it was, after all, only a list of potions ingredients. Yes, when she saw it on his desk and him still in his room dressing, she crossed to take a look. She felt a bit foolish for her odd reaction to the fact that he actually had a list of potions ingredients to provide for the temporary Herbology instructor, especially since she now had a headache from the unaccustomed firewhisky.

In fact, the next two weeks passed rather uneventfully.

Professor Soul...*Isabella*...sat at the far end of the High Table at meals, usually caught up in lively conversation with Hooch and Septima. If the latter two spent far too much time casting amused glances at Severus and Hermione, and if Isabella's glances ranged from confused to speculative, Hermione was able to dismiss them as she engaged Severus in her own lively conversations.

And he didn't spend too much time glancing down the table, after all.

No more than any of the other males in the Great Hall, at any rate.

But she was not prepared, when she walked down the path to the Apparation Point the following Saturday morning, to find herself joined by the lively redhead with the sparkling green eyes.

"You don't mind if I go with you, do you?"

"Erm, not at all," Hermione said, but couldn't resist adding, "Where do you think I'm going?"

"Severus said you were going to Diagon Alley. Am I in error?"

"You spoke to Severus?"

"I was looking for you and...look, if this isn't convenient..."

"Forgive me for being caught off guard, that's all." Hermione adjusted her pace to a more sedate gait to match that of Isabella, and sighed quietly, then forced a brighter

tone of voice. "I suppose we can do our individual shopping and then meet for..."

"Girl talk and drinks at the Leaky Cauldron?" Isabella asked brightly.

"Ice cream at Fortescue's," Hermione responded firmly.

She definitely wanted all her wits about her when she engaged in the aforementioned girl talk with Isabella Soul.

~*SS*HG*~

"You realise you're surrounded by a lot of gossiping old cows," Isabella announced blithely as she dipped her spoon into her ice cream. She gave a saucy grin as she took the bite between her lips and, clearly, savoured it.

"Well, yes. I do realise that." Hermione stared at her own bowl, any appetite she'd had now vanished. She'd accepted that there was a purpose behind this exercise, but now she wasn't sure she really wanted to know about it.

"Not that I mind. They're a great lot of fun and less backbiting than most colleagues I've had to deal with, but still, I would have thought they'd be more protective of you. You're so young, and if anything, I would have expected them to still view you as under their care. It's difficult for a student to become an equal under the best of situations, and I'd hardly consider yours the best."

"Indeed?" Hermione could scarcely anticipate where this was going and only wished she were going, herself. If she'd half an ounce of Gryffindor courage, she'd simply leave before it got sticky.

"Straight from the schoolroom to the staffroom with no formal education or even a gap year to give you some distance."

Hermione flinched. The lack of formal education was something she'd worried about, but Minerva and Filius had insisted she was so far ahead of her peers through her own self-study that it seemed ludicrous to find another instructor and let Hermione slip between their fingers.

"Of course, Defence Against the Dark Arts is hardly an academic subject," Isabella continued. "It's not as if there's a degree plan for it anywhere, so I can see why they'd allow you..."

"It's a vital subject," Hermione snapped.

"And you excelled in it, of course," Isabella remarked, licking her spoon.

"I don't measure up to Harry and Severus and... well, some of the others, but... well, I am an excellent teacher and I bring in others once a month for extra training. In fact," she said, her mind racing, "this is Neville's month but he won't be here. Neville is all the students' favourite, other than Harry, because he's so gentle, and yet in DADA he's an absolute force. I think it amazes and inspires all of them."

She opened her eyes wide and looked entreatingly across the table. "Would you consider filling in for him? I'm sure they'd all love to see what American improvements on the subject you might have learned at Salem."

Isabella blanched. "Me? Why, the subject wasn't even offered at Salem. I'm afraid that kind of thing is totally out of my realm of expertise."

"Pity," Hermione said, swirling her spoon through her melted ice cream. "Even the gossiping old cows all excel at Defence. I'll have to ask Sybil. She hurls a mean crystal ball and has an interesting hex or two up her sleeve."

"Touché." Isabella studied her in a not unfriendly manner. "I'll admit, I couldn't resist listening to what they had to say. Especially when, well, we can be frank, can't we? Especially when the gossip led me to believe that that delicious man you're living with might not really be..." Finally she broke off, evidently seeing that she'd crossed the line. "I'm sorry, I just...well, just for a few extra pounds a year, and...well, honestly, Hermione, what the two of you are doing is so blatant..."

"Blatant?"

"The two of you are close, that's evident to anyone, but it's also evident that you're like a couple of blokes, guffawing over lewd jokes."

Well. That certainly summed them up, but damned if she liked that Isabella Soul was doing the summing.

"And now I've offended you."

"How perceptive," Hermione said sweetly.

"I simply felt... my dear girl, you need someone on your side, a mentor of sorts. Someone who has a broader view of the world and understands just exactly what you're giving up by staying here in the back of beyond."

Hermione rose quickly to her feet. "I trust you can find your way back to the castle." But before she could leave, Isabella's small hand grabbed hers and held tight.

"Please, forgive me. I'm doing this all wrong. Please."

She gazed up at Hermione from beneath lush, dark auburn lashes and her eyes were so transparent in their urgent goodwill, Hermione found herself sinking back into her chair.

"What do you want of me?" Hermione finally asked.

"To start again?"

Hermione didn't answer.

"All right, I had a question, a specific question, something that has been nagging me since I first arrived."

That delicious man. Again, Hermione heard the words spoken in that light, seductive voice.

"Why on earth did your parents allow you to come to Hogwarts?" Isabella asked, and despite Hermione's confusion, it was clear the question was put forth in earnest.

"What else would they have done?" Hermione asked. "It's not as if there were options for a magical child."

Isabella stared at her, bemused, and then caught her breath. "Of course! I'd forgotten that you are Muggle-born. Your parents had no idea."

Hermione shook her head, confused. "Hogwarts is..."

"A backward school mired in the Dark Ages, run by an eccentric who saw danger behind every shadow and, well, I suppose events eventually proved him right, but the school suffered under Albus Dumbledore's command."

Hermione bristled.

Isabella rushed on, "From everything I'm told, you have a brilliant mind. You would have thrived at Salem, which is where my parents sent me. All their curriculum and approaches are cutting edge; your seventh-year Herbology students are doing work that was covered in the fifth-year work at Salem. From what I can tell, it's the same throughout your courses of study, plus you don't even offer some of the more advanced subjects we had. That's where you should have been, Hermione. Not here, and certainly not under the educational guidance of well-meaning people whose own experiences are so narrow and confined. You should be studying in Berlin, now, pursuing dreams and a future that I fear you've never even thought of. There are so many opportunities in the wizarding world, and you left school and... didn't leave!"

Hermione felt the tightening of her throat. Isabella was describing the kinds of dreams she'd had as a first-year, even a fourth-year, but after the Department of Mysteries, her world had narrowed down to threat, danger, and keeping her beloved best friend alive and her parents in the dark.

Isabella touched her arm. "Hermione, there is no tactful way to tell you this. I am appalled that you and Severus are carrying on your masquerade to increase your pay by a few hundred Galleons a year, when..." Her green eyes clouded over. "Hermione, I'm being paid twelve hundred Galleons to teach for eight weeks, and that is far less than I'd earn anywhere else."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. Humiliation warred with rage. They paid this woman more than...

"Because of my education and my credentials," Isabella added gently. "An education and credentials that you should have...should be acquiring now. The education and credentials that would give you options, and allow you to earn the kind of gold you deserve."

Hermione jerked her hands into her lap and clutched them tightly to hide their trembling. "I ask you again. What do you want from me?"

"Are you happy?"

I was.

"I know so many people who could help you. Have you ever considered studying in..."

"Paris," Hermione breathed. "I started learning French when I was eight years old. I knew even then that I wanted to attend the Sorbonne."

"They have a wizarding programme."

"I know."

"Why didn't you? The war ended. You could have left. Was it...of course, money. But there are ways around that."

"It wasn't money. Well, not only money." Hermione stared blankly at the melting ice cream before her. The blood of her friends, soaked into the earth. Their cries and their screams and their sobs, echoing off stone walls. She couldn't turn her back on it. She wanted to honour it, to return Hogwarts to its glory.

A backward school mired in the Dark Ages.

"I've done this all wrong."

"There wasn't a right way to do it," Hermione said, her mouth twisting with suppressed pain.

"I made a mistake."

If Isabella Soul wanted assurance that she'd done the right thing, Hermione couldn't give it to her.

She also couldn't say that she hadn't.

"I need time to think."

"If you decide you want to know more, just tell me. We could go to Paris for a weekend. You could learn of your options." Isabella folded her napkin and placed it beside her empty bowl. "And if you're going to the party for your friend's new baby, you need to get back to the castle."

The party for Neville and Hannah's baby.

Despite the fact that she had the gift in the bag at her feet, she'd forgotten. "Are you coming?" She prayed the witch wasn't. She needed to be alone, desperately.

"I have a few more things to do. I'll find my own way back," Isabella reassured her.

Numb, Hermione made her way to through the door, only remembering later that she'd left Isabella with the bill.

~*SS*HG*~

Well. The witch was simply... a witch, and not in a good way.

Hermione had spent the better part of an hour in the Hogwarts Library researching, and if Salem School was any more advanced than Hogwarts, it was not visible in their literature.

She'd carefully avoided the shelf of brochures from wizarding universities. Perhaps, when things settled down a bit more, when she felt a bit less... uncertain. Perhaps she would go to the Sorbonne. But there was certainly no rush, and she was...well, she was happy here. Happiness counted for something, didn't it? When she'd spent half her life never knowing what new horror would befall Harry and the others she loved, was it truly such an awful thing to want to simply be happy for a bit?

She couldn't even contemplate what Severus would think of that plan and how it might affect him, though why it should, she wasn't certain.

No, there was time enough for anything and everything.

Later.

Someday.

But, she thought for the fourth time in an hour, not now.

She practically scampered down the last flight of stairs and flew across the Entrance Hall on winged feet. If she hurried, she'd catch Severus for a few minutes before it was time for the party.

He wasn't going, of course. Being a surly bastard had its privileges, and avoiding social events at will was one of them. He had written a surprisingly civil note, congratulating Neville and Hannah, offering his willing expertise should they need sedative potions.

For a baby.

She had scolded him severely, although eventually her own smirk made any such efforts futile and so she had finally rolled her eyes skyward and whirled away in a billow of robes, leaving him to sign the note from both of them.

If she could catch him in time, she intended to ask him to help her inscribe the singing book of lullabies she'd purchased for their gift. Surely that would appeal suitably to his wicked sense of the absurd, that generations of Longbottom progeny would haul around a battered copy of *Putting Your Baby to Sleep* with a starchy inscription from one Severus Snape (and of course, his wife).

And then.

And then.

And then.

She rounded the corner to pass the staffroom and froze in place.

Light, delicate laughter floated down the long corridor, and in slow motion, just like bad cinema, the small yet brutal scene played out before her.

Severus and Isabella entering the staffroom.

So innocuous, so innocent.

As he reached over her head and pushed the door open for her...

Opened the door. For *her*.

And his nose quivered...*quivered!*...as he inhaled the scent of her hair.

Startled, Isabella Soul turned her face up to look into his eyes.

And, it was clear, oh yes, so clear that...

She thought him delicious.

Hermione shrank back into the shadows.

The door closed behind them.

The room would be empty, of course. All of the staff would be at Neville's.

Except for Severus, who chose not to go.

And Isabella, who had no reason to go.

He would be able to sniff her hair to his heart's content, Hermione thought.

And she could look at him like he was an ice cream waiting to be licked.

And she stilled every urge she had to storm in after them, because what business of it was hers if they did, after all?

She was certain, quite certain, that he never smelled *her* hair as she passed under his arm.

And that she had never, not once, not *ever*...

Looked up at Severus Snape and thought him delicious.

And, she thought, with a slight catch in her throat, Severus Snape deserved to have someone look at him and think him delicious.

Quietly avoiding that door where she was certain some scent still lingered, Hermione continued her way down the next flight of stairs to their shared quarters, those quarters with separate beds and shared space where they laughed and schemed and got along so fucking happily...

Like a couple of blokes.

Funny, Hermione thought disjointedly, as she entered her own bedroom. She had spent the afternoon with Isabella yet had noticed no scent at all.

And then she found herself on her bed, and thought, How odd, why were there tears on her face? Why did her heart feel like it was shattering?

She had a party to go to, a baby to hold and coo over and friends for whom to be happy, and she was happy, she truly was, hadn't she just spent an hour reminding herself how happy she was?

She turned her face into her pillow and wept until there was nothing left but a hollow feeling where happiness had once been, before razor-sharp shards of reality had pierced the tender boundaries of her soul and let the happiness bleed away.

~*SS*HG*~

She squinted her burning eyes into darkness. A glance at the glowing face of the magical clock by her bedside revealed that while she had slept, darkness had fallen and the party had started a half hour before.

Had she cried herself to sleep?

Bugger!

She hadn't done such a thing since, since...since her fourth year when that bastard had mocked her teeth!

She sat up quickly, ignoring the throbbing ache in her chest that could only mean, well, that she'd pulled something. Pulled something crying. That was all it could mean.

Oh, bugger!

Her eyes even felt puffy, no telling how horrid they looked. She groped for her wand so she could get some light.

And she heard the door open in the sitting room.

"If you'll wait here," Severus said, "I'll fetch it for you. *Lumos*."

A faint glow fell across her floor as the light he summoned entered her open door.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you," Isabella's light, melodious voice responded, and Hermione bit back a snarl. "I should have thought to ask you about it earlier this morning after the staff meeting."

"Here's something you might find of interest while I find the Erasmus...."

"Köhler! Severus, this is magnificent. A first edition!"

"It was a nice addition to our collection here. In fact, you might find his chromolithograph of digitalis interesting."

Oh gods, the ingrate was showing her *etchings!*

"This is magnificent! Do take your time. This book alone could keep me involved for hours. It's not as if there's anything waiting for me in my room, and everyone else will be gone all evening, I'm sure."

She had to make her presence known. She had to grab her package and bid them both goodbye and leave, leave while there was nothing going on in the next room...the very next room...to interrupt.

But her eyes were puffy and burning and her clothes were rumpled and they'd know.

He'd know.

That she had been crying like a stupid little girl who... who still turned to her best friends for comfort when life treated her badly, only she couldn't very well turn to her best friend, could she? He was in the next room with a beautiful woman who smelled so good it made his nose quiver and who thought he was delicious and...

She had to make her presence known *now*.

She stood and once again groped around the bed for her wand.

"Ah... here it is. *Pontchartrain Erasmus, Volume I*, just as I thought."

"Oh, delightful! I'll just sit here and peruse it, if I won't be in your way?"

"You should find his notes on digitalis somewhere in the seventh section..."

"Surely you're not serious. The cardiac glycosides in digitalis weren't even isolated until 1785, and these writings are centuries older than that."

Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed in disgust.

But Severus didn't sound disgusted. He sounded patient...patient!...and polite as he explained, "The cardiac glycosides weren't recorded outside of magical circles, but amongst wizards, they've been used since the time of the ancient Greeks."

"Yes, of course, but I had no idea there would be information in these old writings that still had validity today."

"It's primarily of interest to the potions maker, to be sure, the angle of the slice, the rhythm of the chop, the consistency of the resulting paste and finally, the granular nature of the dried residue. And yet they are also dependent upon the quality of the crop..."

"Which of course, is where the expertise of the Herbologist comes in, of course," Isabella purred.

There was an extended silence in which Hermione strained forward in her attempt to hear, to divine exactly what was happening. Finally, the sound of a page turning. And then another.

Was Isabella seated in her chair, with Severus leaning over her shoulder reading, as he so often did? Were they beside one another on the sofa?

Perhaps she could crawl back into her bed and pretend to be asleep, because to emerge at this point would be humiliating. It would be clear she'd been listening and waiting before revealing herself.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Severus..." The voice had dropped to a lower register. "Forget about the book, why don't you? Do you have anything to drink? Some wine, some firewhisky? I thought I'd get a decent drink this afternoon, but sweet Hermione wanted ice cream."

Sweet Hermione, like she was talking about a child!

"Call her that to her face and she'll hex you bald."

"How... alarming. I realised she had missed out on some of the finer points of higher education, but I had no idea that self-control and maturity of manners were amongst them."

Severus laughed.

Laughed!

"I'd hardly say Hermione is lacking in the social graces..."

She could breathe again.

"...but she's a virago when crossed."

Bastard!

"I wouldn't recommend it."

And she wouldn't recommend him going to sleep with his door open, because she had a dozen different ways to show him just what a virago she could be.

"Of course, she's a charming girl, and I'm hoping I've opened her eyes to some of the educational opportunities that are hers for the taking, now that the needs of that horrid war are no longer stunting her vision."

"You? Opened her eyes?"

"If she has anything approaching the intellect everyone claims, she should really be sharpening it outside these quaint old walls. I am sure you see that, don't you?"

"And you told her this?"

"I fear I may have gone about it the wrong way. I never intended to offend her."

"Hermione has a thick skin. I hardly think you managed such a thing."

"I believe that I, at the very least, gave her some things to consider."

"Indeed?" Severus seemed to be enjoying himself.

Hermione wished she knew why.

"Yes, in fact, she confessed a secret desire to study at the Sorbonne..."

"She did?"

It wasn't like that!

"...and I really think you should encourage her, Severus."

"If..." he said slowly, "...she really has such a desire, I hardly think she needs my encouragement. In fact," he said, his voice a bit firmer, "if Hermione wants something, she lets nothing stand in her way."

"You don't know how much better that makes me feel."

"For someone who has only been inside these castle walls for a few weeks, you've certainly drawn some fascinating conclusions about its occupants."

"I've seen a lot of the world and consider myself quite empathic to the needs of others, and Severus..." her voice dropped into a purr, "I detect a strong sense of need in you. Sometimes, you absolutely reek of it. And Severus... I'd like to be the one who helps you find release."

"Tell me..." His voice was silky and Hermione sank to the floor and buried her face in her knees and covered her head because she did not want to hear this, bloody hell, she did not want to hear this!

"Exactly when did you decide you wanted to take me into your bed?"

Delicate laughter filled the air. "As soon as I saw you, you wicked man."

"But this, *this* didn't just happen. You've clearly been planning it."

"What makes you think so?" Isabella asked coyly.

"The day you entered our staff work room the very first time, your scent was rose with a touch of patchouli. I must admit, I haven't been paying close enough attention because I'm not sure when you changed it, but you did change it, and it was a fascinatingly deliberate change, was it not?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." Again, the laughter.

"Your hair. It smells of lavender and lemongrass. That simply can't be a coincidence."

Hermione gasped, stunned.

"Of course, it was a *mistake*," Severus continued, "but it wasn't a coincidence. For an Herbologist, you have an incredibly insensitive nose. Her scent is cleaner, purer. It's lavender and lemon, plain lemon, not lemongrass."

Hermione found herself stroking her own hair. No wonder she hadn't noticed the witch's scent. It was too similar to her own.

Oh yes, that had been a mistake.

What was the witch thinking? Copying her scent to tempt Severus? She bit her lip to keep the bitter laughter at bay.

"And to be such an astute student of human nature, you seem to have totally missed the mark with me. Whatever made you think I'd want to fuck you?"

There was no mistaking the gasp followed by a hiss of anger...

"Release me!"

"My choices are... release your wrist and let you slap me, or break it and let you wait for Poppy to return from Neville's party, though she's bound to be the worse for wear as I have it on good authority that Minerva was breaking out the scotch for this occasion."

"Bastard!" Isabella hissed.

Splendid bastard! Hermione thought, her heart leaping.

"I'm going to release you, and you are going to retreat to your rooms where you will remain until morning. I'm not going to tell Minerva what has happened here tonight because if she knew, your arse would be out the door at daybreak..."

"Ha! If you knew what they said about the two of you..."

"Of course I know what they say, you stupid woman! And I also know that any one of those witches would mince you and feed you to the owls if they knew what you tried to do. We fought a *war* together," he growled. "You have no idea what that means, no fucking idea because your parents made sure you kept clear of it, from the time you entered school, and you carried on the tradition by pursuing one meaningless course of study after another, as long as it kept you away from what Hermione Granger Snape was fighting from the time she was twelve years old! You ran from the world you were born into and waited until it was safe to return. She walked into it as a naive girl and devoted the next seven years of her life to defending it! And you have the fucking nerve to waltz into this school and set out to humiliate one of the finest, brightest witches to walk these grounds in centuries!"

"She's a know-nothing, uneducated child!"

"She knows lemon from lemongrass..." he said, his voice low and dripping acid. "She can quote that very same volume of *Erasmus*...that you didn't even know existed before you walked into this room...right down to the footnotes. Her Arithmancy skills are already beyond what she'd learn at Oxford *or* the Sorbonne and Septima has been working for a year to find a programme that is worthy of Hermione's time and effort. But more important than any of that, she is my spouse, my legal spouse, and I would no

more dishonour her by fucking your inadequate cunt than I would fuck Rubeus Hagrid."

Hermione's head spun. There were sounds of Isabella leaving, of the door slamming, but she couldn't think about that, about her.

He had defended her as if, as if they had a real marriage and not a farce. He had protected her as he'd protect a real wife.

She leaned her head back against the wall and stared ahead without seeing.

What had she expected? This was not a man who took vows lightly. He was a man of savage honour, and she'd allowed him to take the most important vow of all, and treat it as a joke, but it was no joke, and...and how could she have been so blind?

And why did something in her chest swell to the point where she found it difficult to breathe, to swallow, and all she wanted...really wanted...was to throw herself at Severus Snape and bury herself in his arms and...

She had to stop there, couldn't allow herself to think beyond that.

And then the light that fell across the floor in front of her flared the lightest of greens and she heard the Floo.

"What do you want, Potter?" Severus snarled.

"We're wondering what happened to Hermione, whether to hold dinner any longer."

"What the fuck do you mean? She's not there?"

"It's not like her to be late, and especially not this late. I dunno, I think maybe I'd better get Ron and..."

"I'll find her," Severus snapped.

And Hermione realised she had to say something, had to stop them before they had the entire staff and the remaining members of the Order all combing the hills for her.

She pulled herself to her feet and took a deep breath, forcing calm to the surface, and walked to the doorway. "I'm here," she said. "...I fell asleep."

Severus whirled to face her, his eyes piercing. She shook her head, no, not now, and turned to Harry. "I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well. Tell Neville I'll come when I'm certain I'm not ill."

"Take care, Mione," Harry said, and blew her a kiss. And then he was gone, and there was only Severus.

"I presume you heard it all."

She nodded, jerkily. "I really did fall asleep. I...I woke up when the two of you entered and there simply wasn't a good time to interrupt."

And she stared at him, and he didn't look delicious; he looked like Severus, the professor who had reduced her to tears and challenged her to be the best, and who had protected her from more evil than she'd ever know. He was the Severus who filled the holes left behind when Harry and Ron left, only he didn't just fill the holes, he erased them. She never missed them, never felt lonely or empty because she had him. She had Severus.

And now, he'd turned down an opportunity to bed a beautiful woman because he was a man of honour, this Severus.

He glared at her.

"Oh, Severus..." She felt her lips twitching and finally, couldn't hold it back. "Inadequate cunt?" She exploded with laughter, the deep aching kind that brings tears to your eyes even as your spirit soars. And soon he joined her, both laughing until they collapsed on the sofa, legs stretched before them and heads resting companionably against each other.

"I've...I've just never considered such a thing," she finally choked out. "An inadequate cunt. I rather thought they would be very similar.... Oh, I wish I could have seen her face!"

"Remind me. I'll drag out the pensieve." And he sniggered like a schoolboy.

"You know what she told me?" Hermione asked. "She told me... that you and I are nothing more than a couple of blokes sharing lewd jokes. And I wish I'd said...I wish I'd said, what the bloody hell is wrong with that?" She turned her face toward his, and thought distractedly how long it had been since she'd considered...even noticed...the size of his nose....

And then, she met his eyes.

He was looking at her as if... as if *she* were delicious.

A tremor ran through her body. "But blokes don't do this, do they?" she asked softly.

And she kissed him.

It started lightly, hesitantly, but suddenly, it felt so right, she leaned into it, gave it more...

And felt his long, strong fingers close around her shoulders and push her gently away. "No, Hermione."

"No?" She blinked up at him, confused.

"You don't owe me this." His expression was closed, all humour, all desire, gone.

"I didn't mean it that way." Had she? Had she meant it as a reward, as payment for a debt? And what was this ache that wouldn't go away? Not through tears or laughter that swelled even bigger when they kissed, and hurt even more when he gently pushed her away?

No. She hadn't meant it that way.

She leaned over him again, this time shifting until she was in his lap, and before he could stop her, she placed her hands on either side of his face and said, "I meant *this* way."

She tilted her face and this time when she kissed him, it wasn't light or hesitant. It was determined. His lips remained closed but she stroked them with her tongue and they parted with a soft gasp.

And he responded. Oh, yes, he responded. He groaned deep in his throat and she revelled in it, as she tasted and savoured and suckled at his lower lip.

His hands closed over her wrists. He pulled away and his dark eyes were glaring at her. "I said..."

"Are you going to break my wrists and leave me to a drunken Poppy Pomfrey?" she smirked. "Are you going to say my cunt is..." She froze in place and pulled her hands free. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't force you to...to..."

Swallowing thickly, she eased out of his lap and tried to stand, to leave, but this time when he snatched her wrists, he yanked her back into his lap.

"It's not that," he insisted.

"You don't have to explain."

"Hermione, you can't think... you can't think for one moment..."

"I don't want to talk about it! Let's just forget I even mentioned it."

"They were just words, and they had nothing to do with you, and if you're thinking..."

"Well, it's not as if you banged down my door to get back into my knickers," she said with a sniff.

"Good gods, nothing about you is inadequate...especially that!"

"Then perhaps," she said, knowing she was fighting dirty, "you need to convince me of that fact." She leaned over to kiss him again, but this time he pulled to the side.

"You don't know what you're asking," he groaned.

"I do. I do know. I'm asking you to be my lover..." Again, she captured his mouth, but didn't hold it. This kiss was merely a promise, moist and heated. "As well as my friend."

"But if it doesn't work, if we don't work, it ruins everything." His eyes flew open and he pinned her with the intensity of his words. "Everything that is precious to me."

"Then we'll have to make it work," she breathed.

"Insufferable..." he growled, then yanked her to him and his kiss...his kiss...was devouring.

And then it stopped.

Cold.

"Whaaa?" she managed.

Severus stood, and only his wiry strength kept her from landing on her arse on the floor, but instead he held her until her feet found purchase.

"Come," he said, and started leading her across the room.

"But we had a mood here. Cosy, fire, sofa, *amood!*"

"And we have a bed in here," he said, "and as I recall, you believe it's the husband who is responsible for setting the mood?"

"I hope you don't mean music, because I find music very distracting."

After a flick of his wand, she was naked. She automatically covered her scar, but he batted her hand away.

"Don't be a prude, Granger. I want to see your breasts."

"Severus! Whatever happened to Slytherin seduction?"

Another flick, and he was naked, and damn, she'd forgotten those ropey muscles, that lean body, and to bloody hell with his scars. "A mood," she whined. "Not just a slam, bam, thank you, ma'am, shag."

Now he had her spread-eagled on the bed and was kneeling between her knees.

"I don't think you even want this to work..." she began, and then, shrieked, as he skipped all the preliminaries and closed his lips around her clit, and Merlin, Merlin, Merlin, began to stroke her with his tongue.

And then, quit. He raised his head and smirked. "How's that mood now, darling?"

"Gods damn you, keep going," she gasped, and then, when he did, she added, "A little higher... and maybe, just little to the left...my left!"

And then a low, throaty keening filled the air, a noise unlike any she'd heard in her entire life, and it was coming from her throat, as her thighs quivered so that she clamped them shut on his head, and she came like the bloody Hogwarts Express.

She could scarcely breathe, much less think, when he finally eased up her body and, eyes glittering, smirked at her. "What's the matter, Hermione? Snake got your tongue?"

She eventually managed a, "Guh..."

"I owed you that one," he said matter-of-factly. "We're even."

She reached a trembling hand up and dug her fingers into his hair, and dragged his head down until she could kiss him. Not just kiss him, but ravish him as they lay on their sides. Their legs twined and she felt the length and girth of him, hot and heavy between them, and she knew what had to happen next.

She slid down his body, despite his hand clawing at her. "Not now, not that...I don't think...I don't think I can hold out if you..."

One long stroke of her flattened tongue and he shut up. One slow swirl around the head and he moaned. One long, nibbling kiss that started at the base and worked its way to the tip, and he let out a long, guttural snarl....

"What's the matter, Severus?" she asked sweetly. "Tongue got your snake?"

His glare was lethal.

She held it in her hand and studied it. She had come to the conclusion that it simply couldn't be as big as it had seemed that night when she was drunk and overwhelmed, but now, oh yes now, it was clear, it really was that big.

"Please tell me you haven't named your todger," she said, and then sucked the head into her mouth. He didn't answer, though his thighs jerked wildly beside her.

"Severus?" she asked. "Have you?"

"Fuck, no," he said.

"Oh, good, because I think men who name their cocks are juvenile," she said, relieved.

And then, because she believed him when he said he might not hold out, and because she was selfish enough to want to be in on the act when it finally happened, she gave his nameless cock one last peck and climbed back up until she straddled him, just like before. Even though her memory was hazy, she did remember this, as she smiled down at him and managed to get things in position, and then...

"No," she said, "I don't think so."

"What?" he snarled.

She rolled to the side and gave him a small tug to follow her. "You do it," she said softly, spreading her legs for him.

After only the slightest hesitation, he settled himself between them and said, "If you're sure."

"Very sure," she said earnestly, and braced herself for what proved to be a very slow invasion, indeed. She watched his face, the contours of muscle and bone that flexed and tensed as he pushed in so exquisitely slowly, the world seemed to stop revolving in the sheer wonder of it. "Yessss..." she hissed, as his eyes squeezed shut and his hair fell forward in dark curtains. "Oh... yessss."

And when he was finally there, encompassed by her, filling her, he opened his eyes and asked, "Are you all right?"

She let the long, tight squeeze of her body around him and her kiss, hot and languid, answer his question. When he started moving, again, it was slow, cautious, but so sweet she felt the quivering heat building again and it was all she could do to simply grab his shoulders and hold on. She should be participating...stroking, rubbing, whispering heated words, but all she could do was simply exist in the experience of this joining, this incredible *joining*.

And then she was crying...gasping and crying for the third time in hours. First had been tears of pain, and then tears of laughter, and now tears of ecstasy like she'd never known before, and all she could do was cling to him and clutch him and let her voice cry out to the heavens as his back arched and he thrust into her one final time with a roar....

And she thought, through the haze, that her snake had turned into a lion.

He buried his face in her hair and whispered, "My treasure."

And then she could think no more.

~*SS*HG*~

"You're even bossy in bed, Granger."

"I am not!"

"You are, but that's all right, it takes the guesswork out."

"Next time... next time I'll just let you work everything out on your own."

"You act as if that's a threat. Trial and error with your body sounds quite delectable."

She shivered in delight.

"Not that I expect you'll be able to manage to withhold instruction, of course, but I'm sure you'll make a valiant effort."

She stroked a finger down the long bridge of his nose.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Admiring it."

"Indeed," he said sceptically.

"But I don't like the idea of other women looking at it and... imagining. In fact, I imagine I feel about your nose the way you might feel about other wizards staring down my cleavage."

He let out a bark of laughter and then stopped. "You're...you're serious."

"It's a quite magnificent nose."

"I vow I will keep my nose out of other witches'... business."

She pressed a kiss where her finger had so recently lingered. "Severus..."

"Mmm."

"Before. You said we were risking something precious. You thought what we had before tonight was precious?"

"If I had to choose between this, and what we had before... I couldn't give up what we had before."

"But, we really were like a couple of blokes."

"And I really did reek of need, all too often, but I would have spent the rest of my life with nothing but my fist for relief, before I would lose what you gave me."

"I don't understand."

"You bring out the worst in me, you wicked woman, the very worst. You scheme with me, you plot with me, you take every bad instinct I have and refine it and make it worse."

"Oh. That."

"You have no idea what it means to... to be so safe."

"Oh, Severus." She curled more tightly against him but felt a scared little knot form in her belly. "And that's better than sex?"

"Not better. More important. More vital. More rare... for me."

And she remembered, and the knot turned into ache. How lonely had he been, how alone? And he would endure need and forgo sex just to keep her near?

To keep *her* near...

"Severus... is this what love feels like?" she whispered into the darkness.

"If a man loves a woman beyond all that is holy or rational, and yet, he hides it from her, is it still love?"

She opened her mouth, but he covered it with his fingers.

"Think hard before you answer, because you're answering for both of us."

And then, she knew. She knew it with a swelling in her heart that threatened to overwhelm her, knew what she's always known but had been afraid to see.

"It was the most precious thing in my life, even before, especially before, even though I wasn't aware it was," she whispered into the darkness. "To lose you would have killed me, and that's what I realised today. And I'm sorry I didn't know that I loved you. I feel like I cheated you because I didn't know it at the time, but that's because I am insufferable and you are my big, brave wizard who loved me anyway, and..."

And there was really nothing else to say, which was fortunate, because it was impossible to say it when he was kissing her senseless.

~*SS*HG*~

This time, when they approached the staffroom door, he used magic to open it.

She supposed she could take it personally, but the fact was, the only way for him to step ahead and open the door would be to let go of her, and she much preferred having his arm around her, thank you very much.

They entered the room to a groan of disgust. "Minerva, make them stop!" Hooch declared. "I swear, they're getting worse, and if I have to watch much more of this I'm going to vomit!"

The rest of the staff were, if less vocal, of a similar opinion... if their expressions were any indication.

Except for Isabella Soul, who sat stiffly in her seat, staring straight ahead.

"Good morning, all," Severus intoned solemnly as he held Hermione's seat for her. And then he turned and gave Isabella a most civil nod. "Professor Soul, I do believe I owe you an apology for what transpired last evening, and I hope you understand that any insult I made was purely in the hypothetical. I can assure you, I have heard no rumours about..."

"Severus Snape!" Minerva said sharply. "Please tell me you haven't been insulting our visiting professor!"

Severus remained guiltily silent, but Hermione patted his hand comfortingly. "You know how Severus is, Minerva. I think it's quite unexpectedly mature of him to apologise, after all. It's not as if he does that very often!"

"Please," Isabella said desperately. "I think we can drop the subject now; all is forgiven."

Hermione leaned across Severus. "Really, I was greatly relieved because I never realised a person could actually have an inadequate..."

"Hermione!" Isabella interrupted, frantic. "Truly! All is forgiven!"

"Blokes can be so insufferable," Hermione said sympathetically, and then beamed up at Severus with all the love she could muster.

Sybil looked from her teacup across the table through her thick lenses, her mouth sagging open in shock. "Hermione! Severus! The leaves are telling me great news!" She closed her eyes and lifted her hands skyward, then popped her eyes back open and gaped at the two of them. "I...I am clearly mistaken. Obviously, you can't be expecting a wee one, Hermione, since you and Severus aren't...well, you know."

"I told you they're going to fake a baby!" Hooch shouted.

"Silence!" Minerva shouted back.

Hermione and Severus turned to each other and said in the same breath, "Did you...?"

And leaped to their feet.

"I'm sorry, Minerva but I have to brew..." Severus began.

"...take a potion," Hermione finished. She fluttered a hand in front of her face. "I think...I think I'm coming down with something!"

As the door slammed behind them, she heard Filius's querulous voice. "Well, I never!"

And Minerva's sharp, "Isabella, if that man said anything to you that..."

And Isabella's desperate, "I don't want to talk about it!"

"Granger," Severus growled as they sped down the corridor, "who are the two most intelligent members of the Hogwarts staff?"

She simply snorted.

~*SS*HG*~

"Grandfather, tell us again how you knew we'd need exactly thirty-seven place settings for our family!"

"Yes, Dad, it wouldn't be Christmas without *that* charming story."

"I planned to return them and get the money, but your grandmother insisted on having insolent, troublesome children and I got distracted."

"But Grandfather, how did you know there would be exactly thirty-seven in our family?"

"When we reached that nice, round number, I decreed that there would be no more."

"Um, Father, about that decree..."

"Good gods, Eileen, don't tell me you're having another one."

"It's all right, darling, we'll find another place setting somewhere."

"Well, in that case, my treasure, I suppose I will have to allow it. But it's a good thing I married you for the money, or else we couldn't afford it."

"Mom, Dad, you are both insufferable. And you're setting a horrid example for the children."

"Insufferable means loveable beyond measure and horrid means delightful. Granddad told me so."

"Indeed," Hermione said. "Now, be a dear and climb out of your grandfather's lap so he can eat, and would someone pass the goose?"

She pretended not to notice her husband's hand climbing her thigh under the table.

And smirked.

~*mischief*managed*~

Original Prompt: *Hermione and Severus have made a secretly celibate marriage of convenience to increase their pay rates as Hogwarts Professors. They are forced to publicly behave as a married couple to foil attempts to prove their marriage is a sham.

A/N Chocolate and kudos to the betas who helped me get it written: annietalbot, ginny_weasley31, deemichelle, and lifeasanamazon . I also must say that I know I read a reference to Hermione "coming like the Hogwarts Express" elsewhere, but can't recall... (snipped words). I am now told it was in my all-time favorite MLC and fanfic, Tyger! Tyger! by the fabulous bloodcult of freud. Why didn't I remember that? It just seemed to fit so I hope I haven't stomped on any toes by using it.

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The Marriage Benefit received the "Best Mid-Length and Best Humour awards in Round Four of the SS/HG Awards. Thank you to all who voted!

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